

Middle Ages Mania: Igniting Reluctant Writers in Cycle 3

Joan A. Crossley



Joan Crossley is a cycle-three teacher. Much of her experience has been in open area and team teaching situations, and specializes in social studies when given the opportunity. She participates in various sports throughout the year to keep her sanity and also has a keen interest in history, nature, and travel.

What To Do

What to do? Something had to be done but what? I was very disappointed with what my Grade six students were working on, or all too frequently, not working on. They were notorious for not completing written assignments. It was not unusual to receive only a quarter of their work. I decided, after a few frustrating weeks when I found it almost impossible to assess their true capabilities, to take stock of the situation. From my daily interactions with them, I knew a few students had shown good insight into various topics and stories. Some had even done the occasional good piece of writing when the spirit moved them. Others could recount their activities before class with enthusiasm, but in a perfunctory fashion during class, they had "nothing" to talk or write about. Some of these students could draw detailed sketches of scenes from a story we'd shared so obviously they had become engaged with certain books. There were also the students who were convinced they were 'no good' at writing stories or poems and had the fear of failure looming overhead; yet when prodded, they revealed interesting and powerful imaginations. The thought processes were there but, something happened when the ideas were to take written form. My sense of their individual abilities didn't match their performance on paper. The problem was to convince my students to value their ideas enough to share them in writing.

I would start from who they were, where they'd been, determine where we hoped to go as a class, and then find the best route. A tall order, but obviously nothing would occur if we stayed as we were, -- with me increasingly frustrated yet determined to see results, and the students oblivious to and intransigent upon the need to write. Writing was a chore for them. In spite of my entreaties, I'd receive the same well-worn material they unrolled for every teacher. We needed some zest, life, and purpose.

Portrait of a "Challenging" Group

Exactly who was this group? It consisted of twenty-nine restless, talkative, grade-six students. The bulk of them were underachievers, poorly motivated and

irresponsible about their work. Four received remedial help. One child was autistic, one classified as a discipline problem, two had serious learning difficulties, two were on ritalin, and two had serious social problems. Two had been in a special class for most of their years in elementary school. There was a wide range of abilities and of attitudes towards school. Unfortunately, it is the increasingly normal classroom for this day and age!

The majority had been in the same school for most of their schooling, and teachers of the previous grades mentioned their lack of inspiration, motivation, and effort. These students, who were so unproductive, had at one early stage in their school career complained to their parents about the quantity of homework. As a group, the parents had taken the children's side. The teacher in question had never had that comment made before or since by a parental group. Now that their children were in grade six, the parents were concerned as their children were obviously experiencing difficulty coping with the demands of school. Responsibility in terms of deadlines, correct presentation of work, following instructions and taking time to think were all things the parents understood their children needed. When they read their children's work, they were generally dismayed at its poor quality. In some cases, they could not understand the message their child was trying to convey. They realized there was a problem especially as the following September, their children would be entering high school. "Will he/she be able to cope?" became the universal refrain. The fear of high school seemed to galvanize my parents' concerns.

Many of the parents decided to tighten things up at home to try to get their children's schooling back on track and closer to their expectations. As a lot of them discovered, it is difficult enough to reinforce certain rules and expectations at this age, let alone introduce them for the first time! Threats were made about loss of privileges, and now many were either having to carry through with them or cave in. They certainly knew their children's personalities and many commiserated with me for having to deal not only with their child but all the others as well! Verbally, all the parents were very supportive.

As previously mentioned, the majority of the class had been together throughout elementary school. The school itself tended to be very traditional with almost the entire staff being long time teachers there. Here, students usually sat at their desks working quietly, doing independent work. There was very limited group work or collaboration, even in art. I was the newcomer, having been reassigned to this school during a school board reorganization the previous year. I had come from a much larger school where there had been much more awareness of current educational trends. I was more used to teaching students first and the curriculum second.

Glimmer of Hope

It was with some trepidation that I realized that what this group of students required was *more* freedom not *less*. If they were given more responsibility would they produce more? Certainly I couldn't be less pleased than I already was. I was increasingly reluctant to look at any of their writing pieces, as they were undetailed, unimaginative, non-experimental, and downright boring!

There was a glimmer of hope for me, however, when I noticed that the class had functioned well when we did paired reading. They would choose their spot at their seats, on the floor or in the hall. Once finished, they would come and collect a follow-up activity. They knew exactly what they had to do and what was expected, yet at the same time, they made some decisions themselves. I thought if I could expand upon that approach, perhaps we could get past our impasse.

For this glimmer to become a flame, we needed an idea that would capture our interest and lead to complete involvement. If the design and execution were to be different from anything the students had done before, perhaps the novelty might lead them to some enthusiasm. I felt we had nothing to lose, but what to do? I couldn't consult with others in the school as had always been my wont when embarking upon a new undertaking. What I was beginning to envision would not be compatible with how my fellow teachers organized and ran their classes.

We needed a topic that would be of interest, but would be basically new territory. We would require lots of hands-on material to accommodate all levels and types of learners. There needed to be lots of scope for imagination, and perhaps most importantly, lots of interest for me. If this was to be a large-scale project, I wanted to be enthused about it as well. As I knew from past team-teaching experiences, it would require lots of involvement and time to pull it off effectively. With a background and interest in history, it seemed natural that something historical might be appealing to both me and my students. As some students had earlier expressed an interest in castles and knights, my students and I decided to investigate life in the Middle Ages. At this time, I decided to keep a journal on how the project went.

Fanning the Flame

We eased into the idea. I knew if I had said "we'll study the Middle Ages and you'll do lots of writing," there would have been a collective groan, a dearth of imagination and nothing accomplished. I felt gradual immersion in the topic was the way to go, but first we needed to build some common background through reading lots of novels set in the Middle Ages. I read these novels to my class, and although they were in grade six, and although they listened to the books rather than decoded them themselves, I consider that they did read them. Familiarity with the content of a book is the foundation for making meaning from a text. The means of acquiring the knowledge of a text is less important than having that knowledge. How many adults can distinguish the impact of books they read themselves in childhood from books they had read to them?

Earlier in the year, we had read a trilogy by Ludmila Zeman, a retelling the epic of *Gilgamesh*. We had discussed how it was one of the first written stories, so it was a logical step to introduce the oldest English story of *Beowulf* with its monster, knights and hero at this time. From there, we made the transition to the hero of Sherwood Forest, Robin Hood.

Through these texts, we were exposed to old-fashioned vocabulary and phrases. The "prithee sir," "three score and five," and "right comely lass" references brought smiles to their faces. Certain expressions had to be tried out on neighbours and friends as well. They enjoyed deducing a modern day equivalent. We linked this concept to the idea of our modern specialty, languages as employed in computer terminology, C.B. radios, hockey and others infinitum. They needed time to play with the ideas in the books as part of enjoying them, and their pleasure led to the development of reading "skills." Whether it was the language and/or content of the stories that inspired them, they showed their enthusiasm for these books through total recall of events, and opinions, well-supported with evidence from the text.

To delve a little more into knights and castles, exposure to another hero of the day was in order. We encountered the ideas of gallantry and quests through some of the adventures of King Arthur and his knights. It is important to remember that prior knowledge cannot be taken for granted. In today's multi-cultural classrooms, children come from very diverse backgrounds and therefore have very different cultural, linguistic, and personal experiences. With some positive exposure to the literature about the Middle Ages, we had established a common base from which to begin. We had some common themes, settings, and language with which to inspire our writing.

Part way through this general introduction, we began to work upon developing a setting for our writing. Two of my students, who were in after-school day-care, collaborated on painting a castle gateway, complete with portcullis ready to be lowered. On the Friday afternoon, this went up around our classroom door, so that when the students entered on Monday morning, they seemed to step back in time. Exclamations of "Wow!" "Cool!" and "Wicked!" heralded their arrival. It certainly had caught their attention and piqued their interest.

Inspired by the literature we read, we discussed coats of arms and their purpose. That week, we made our shields with which we lined the corridor leading to

our "castle." This hallway we dubbed the "Hall of Shields." I had initially been concerned about authenticity for our shield designs when I realized there was a burgeoning of hearts on them, especially from my socialites! Perhaps that was because we did the activity close to Valentine's Day when such things were on their minds even more! I had it in my mind, they could work on their personal coats of arms later, but these were to be more "authentic." I had to step back, tell myself it did not matter and realize they were working hard on them, showing thought, effort, and sticking to their task. They were involved and were definitely producing personalized work. These were all elements I was trying to achieve! Each student had also done a knight in armour out of various colours of foil paper mounted on black card stock for our back wall we called the "Knights Gallery." These nicely complimented our pictures and posters of castles and medieval scenes that we put on the bulletin boards and walls.

The students were enthused about their classroom and referred proudly to entering their "dungeon." I could have been upset by that, but the way it was always said was with enthusiasm, never as if they were headed to torture! Other classes who used our hallway were quite envious, and I overheard some of the girls from the other classes speaking to Carolyn and Debbie, who had their locker at the "gateway." "Lucky you! You get to do those neat things!" More than once, students reported that their friends in the other classes wished they could do "these great things in art." Certainly, we were starting to feel special, like a genuine learning community. I was just hoping the enthusiasm was contagious, and we would turn out masterpieces of the written sort too.

Everyone had been involved in the art and had been happily involved in creating and completing their task to varying degrees of complexity. They were all trying new things and they had all encountered success; it was upon a very positive note that we began to carry over the same detail and description from their artistic endeavours to written ones. Some students needed to make or show something concrete before they could write about it. My autistic student, Mark, in particular,

needed to draw before he could write. For example, he could draw a sword and with a bit of guidance, would then be able to write a little about that sword. Without the sketch, it was too abstract for him to work.

Now that the auditory and visual senses had been stimulated, it was now time to seriously take pen in hand!

Writing Stations

The time had come to do some involved creative writing, now that we had some medieval content. The class had been used to a very structured approach and had difficulty arriving at their own topics. Some type of self-directed activity would provide flexibility as well as taking into account their restlessness and motion. The students also needed exposure to a variety of genres and of course, the activity had to be inclusive of all students.

To meet these needs, I set up five stations of various writing text types in the class. Each station had a list of suggested activities that could be combined, changed or adapted as seen fit. This provided for creativity yet also provided structure and concrete ideas for those who required it.

At the first station, there was a list of story starters, headings, ideas for stories which could be done with or without a partner that were more realistic in tone (see figure 1). Station two was an interview/reporting activity. Here the writing was geared for all our future newspaper, TV, radio reporters, and talk show hosts. If they wanted, this could be a partner station with the option of presenting it. Imagination and fantasy would roll in Station three. Here, there were magic potions, unicorns, wizards, princesses, and other elements of fantasy text-type. At Station four, our poets would experiment with various poetical forms. The previous term we had read and written different types so students were familiar with some of the possibilities (see figures 2 and 3). Station five contained the odds and ends for newspaper items, -- obituaries, want ads, lost-and-found, for-sale, and others. Here the visual learners could draw and illustrate as part of the assignment.

(see figure 4)

figure 1 - diary

June, 1158

Dear Diary,
 Tonight I am sitting here alone and weary. I'm waiting until this horrid battle between King Arthur's and King George's men is over. My husband is one of King Arthur's soldiers. He was not very strong when he left. He was recovering from malaria, and was starting to feel better, but still he wasn't really strong enough to go to battle. I do not wish to be left alone with four children and one on its way. We are so close to finishing our little home for our family. John, my husband, has been working on it for a few years now and it will take just a few more months and we will be able to move in. I pray every day that he will be home soon.

Castle for Sale!

Once in a life-time offer! King Arthur's pointer, wooden bowls, and great antics, plus a bonus, his armor! The castle is strongly built of stone, and has a commanding position over the surrounding country side. There's a great hall, 100m time 100m. There's 8 bedrooms each are 10m times 25m. There's a small chapel. Though the kitchen is rather small, The great hall is huge! There's a huge well in the courtyard. The castle never runs dry. Of course there's a solar and prison tower. The lord's room is fully furnished, with velvet red walls. There's a fireplace, which warms up the whole castle. Please Go to: 1524 Rosemead roadway (near suncamera) If it interests you! Hoping to hear from you soon!

figure 3 - real estate ad

figure 2 - poem

A is for accurate shots.
R is for range practice.
C is for castle sieges.
H is for high shots.
E is for good eye sight.

HOOD, ROBIN OBITUARIES

ON OCTOBER 5TH 1165, IN SHERWOOD FOREST IN HIS CASTLE OF THE VERY STRONG KILLING DISEASE PLAGUE, AT THE AGE OF 65 YEARS OLD, HE LEFT BEHIND HIS BROTHER JOHN HOOD AND HIS SISTER MARY HOOD. HE ALSO LEFT BEHIND HIS WIFE LADY MARION AND HIS SON LITTLE JOHN. HE WILL SADLY BE MISSED BY MEMBERS OF THE COMMUNITY. VISITATION IS TO BE HELD AT KANE AND FETTERLY FROM 1:00-5:00 AND 7:00-9:00 ON OCTOBER 10TH THERE WILL BE A MASS IN HIS MEMORY. HE WILL BE BURIED AT SHERWOOD CHURCH. IN LIEU OF FLOWERS YOU CAN MAKE DONATIONS TO THE PLAGUE SOCIETY.

figure 4 - obituary

Variety of Text Types

I set a minimum requirement for the group. Each student was expected to complete one assignment from station one, one from station two or three, three poems from station four, and two items from station five. I expected my more capable students, Debbie and Aaron, would to go beyond this minimum, while I adjusted Mark's assignment to feature more work from my newspaper and poetry sections. At each station there were hints, suggestions, and samples of the text types. The students could work in any order; if they developed a mental block, they could help each other or work on another topic. Each student had a file, accessible at all times, kept in a filing cabinet. On the inside cover was a list of the stations so they could keep track of their writing pieces. This would help me see where they were. As well, I would have my own checklist so I could keep tabs as I circulated. It would also ensure I'd see students regularly. At any time, if they wanted to take a piece of writing home to work on it, they could do so. If they were on a roll, they could keep on rolling!

At this stage, I was a little concerned about them keeping their work in their folders, because as a group, they were disorganized and had lost so many sheets and assignments in the past. I was also hoping that they'd be more inspired and reliable, seeing as some of them would have a partner relying upon them. In actual fact, those who misplaced their work always found it again. What was truly amazing was that no one lost their work. I could only put it down to the fact that they cared about what they were creating.

When the time came to introduce the writing stations, I remember wondering how they would react. My plan seemed good to me but, now was the time to find out.

Becoming "Cool"

I recorded my reactions in the log I was keeping on the project.

Today, I set up a number of stations. I haven't quite finished the fine tuning. No one said or noticed anything but as I added things in my spare moments, a few asked me what I was doing. I mentioned we'd be doing some activities

based on the medieval theme. Later on, I noticed a few of the girls from my 'Miss Sweet Valley High' group looking over station two. I overheard "interviews" and "cool!" The only things I've heard Stacey call "cool" before

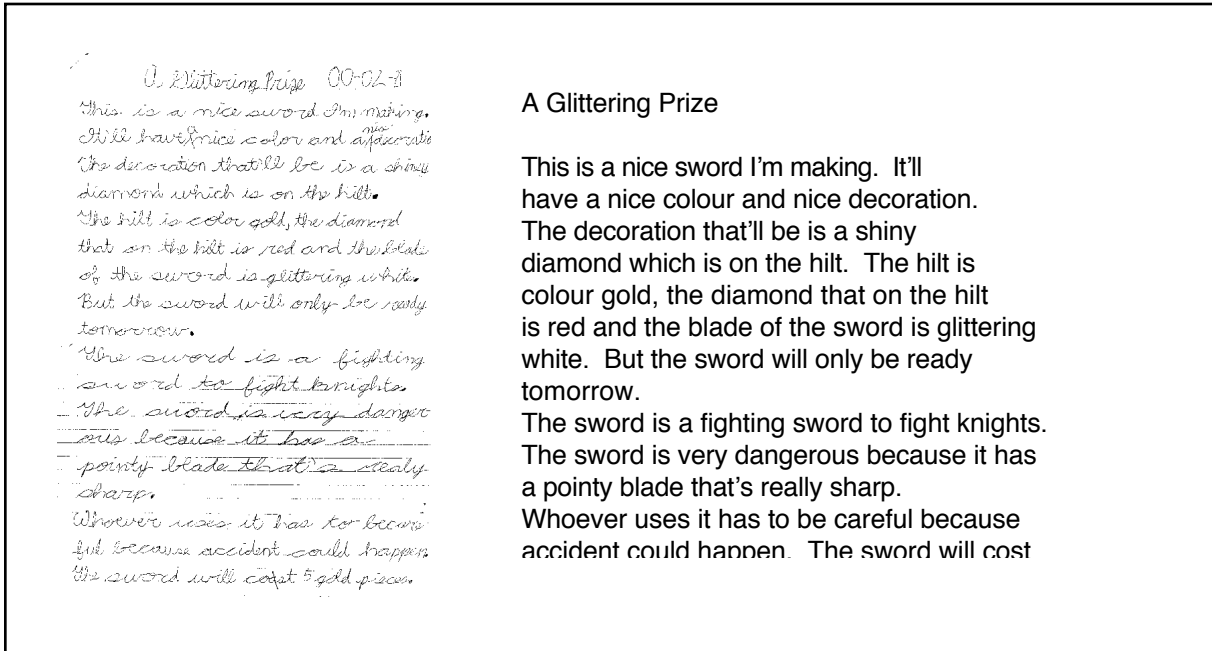


figure 5

have been clothes and shopping at the mall!

So that seems to be an encouraging start with one of my class leaders seeming to approve of the exercise.

Of course, some successes seem fleeting, as only the next day I wrote this entry:

I probably goofed. I talked about stations, choices, how it would work and then I asked them to have a look at the various options before tomorrow. A number of students asked if they could get started then. It was then that I realized we only had ten minutes before dividing off for another class. Poor planning on my part. I should have been able to go with this initial flow of interest. I should have allowed more time. I whetted their appetite and said, "Sorry, you've got to go." Perhaps I'm apprehensive of what will happen - afraid they'll swamp one station or get 'hyper' being such an excitable bunch. Relief! That was my feeling the next day when there was no mad dash to

stations. Many had already checked the sites and decided where to start. Those checking the stations were nicely dispersed so there wasn't a crush. Some discussions took place.

"Let's do the interview. We could be at a tournament," said Serge.

"Yeah," replied Tom, "or it could be an archery contest and I could interview you?"

Some pupils went back and forth to verify some point or other, but in a very short time, they were seated, planning their first steps.

"I'm starting with a poem," stated Helen.

Even Mark, my autistic student, was at work, proclaiming, "I'm doing a sword to sell!" (See figure 5.)

The students were creating and collaborating. They surprised me a little with their sense of involvement. Perhaps it was the sense of freedom and trust they enjoyed. They were responsible for the choices they made. The literature which we had shared had engaged them. They had enjoyed the stories that I had read complete with dramatic flair, -- the use of expression, the changes in pace and volume that makes tales leap off the page and come alive. They had been exposed to the elements of what makes a good story by experiencing it and now were keen to try themselves.

I had worried for nothing. My reluctant writers were eager and raring to create! I could hardly believe they were the same students. And so we began, with me holding my breath and crossing my fingers that they would carry through their ideas and initial enthusiasm through to fruition.

Parallel Developments: Using A Research Process

While we began the writing component of our project, there were many other activities that we worked on simultaneously. To further immerse ourselves in the Middle Ages, we started to read the novel, *The Door in the Wall* by Marguerite de Angeli. It was an ideal book with its rich language and setting, giving us a feel for the times. The ideas in the book inspired more research on the origin of last names, pictorial inn signs for an illiterate population, and also, more creative writing. As the project progressed, we found we were interested in certain topics. We brainstormed possibilities for research and decided upon oral presentations,

The Peddler of Swaffam

I think that this is a very good story because it teaches two very good lessons to children. They are...

1. When a man had a dream about finding a pot of gold in a peddler's garden under a bush, he went to find it. Although people told him that it was a bad idea, he continued to follow his dream. I think that it is a good lesson for children because it tells them to follow their dreams, like if one child has a dream to become a doctor, he should work hard to achieve his dream. But no matter what dream it is, the child shall know that he/she has to work hard to achieve it. My dream is to fly passengers from place to place.

2. The other message on this story is about generosity. When John Chapman found the gold, he did not keep it like a greedy man. He gave it to the priest to help build the church.

These two lessons are very important because they will make one's life better.

But besides the lessons, there is one very big question. It is... Who buried the pot of gold? My hypothesis is that a very rich man with no family or friends buried the treasure and he knew someone good would find it.

accompanied by illustrations or models to share our information. For this, we reviewed the research process, starting with our individual topic selection. I modeled how to formulate questions to discover particular topics and then, showed my students how to narrow the topic down. Specific research skills were reviewed - the use of tables of contents, indexes, and an encyclopedia. Validity and accuracy of sources was

figure 6

discussed, particularly with Internet sites. How to locate and gather information from a variety of sources were also reviewed. At this age, many students believe they can find a book or entry on a specific topic - for example hairstyles of the Middle Ages. They need to be taught how to look under general headings such as style, figure 7

The Swaffham Chronicle *Castle for Sale*

This castle was once the king of Swaffhams castle. The king died so there is no one to take over the castle. The castlekeeper will love the castle because the kitchen walls are 10 meters wide, and 11 meters in length extra thick walls for warmth. It is located in the heart of Swaffham. It has great protection. 11 meter high walls. Build in solid stone. It also has a 6 meter in depth moat. The castle is 2000 square meters, 150 rooms, 90 rooms have a fireplace. The king's chamber walls are done of copper. The well is 165 meters deep. Water is very clean. 5 dungeons, roof of Norman keep redone in lead. The great hall is 51 meters long. Wonderful 27 meter high stained glass windows imported from Italy. Excellent for banquets. Send a messenger to the only castle in Swaffham. Selling for 176,000 gold pieces. Comes with 50 peasants, and 515 acres of land.

costume, dress, as well as under related areas such as play- production or costume-making.

The topics they selected were broad enough to allow for a variety of projects on topics of interest to each student. Topics ranged from monks, to the training of knights, falconry, glass-making, clothes, food and the Black Death. Different topics

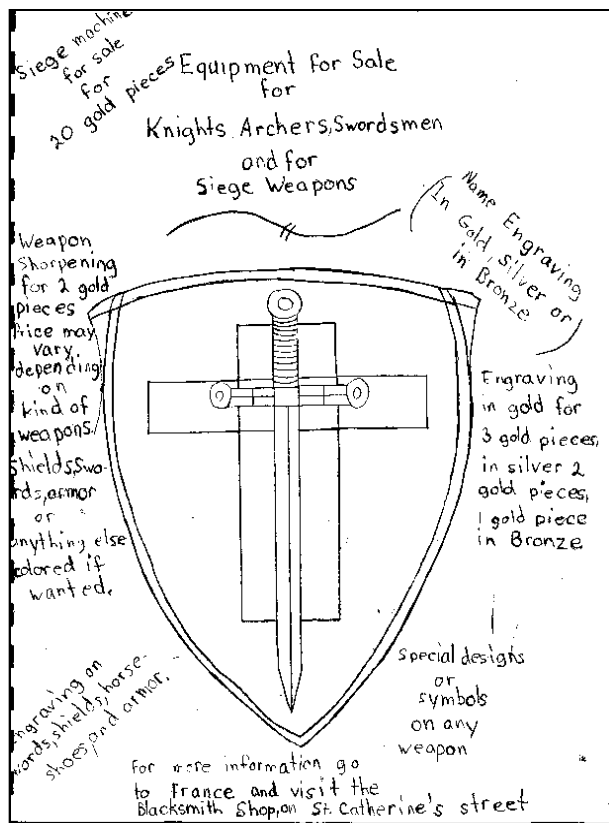


figure 8

were researched so that this information could be shared as we lacked the time and resources to study each area separately. This created audience interest for all the presentations and made each researcher responsible for teaching her/his topic to the rest of the class. All this background research and information also provided material which was incorporated into my students' writing.

Once the information had been gathered, it had to be organized, summarized, and put in terms everyone could understand. Issues such as plagiarism, the correct use of quotations, and conflict over dates arose, requiring

explanation and resolution. The value and compilation of the reference list was also an important learning task.

As we proceeded with the project, we also took time to share articles, poems, ballads, or picture books. The origins and inspiration for this project came from literature and it seemed natural to continue to read work set in the Middle Ages. We enjoyed some books just for the richness of the language, some for their stories, and some for their illustrations or originality. Stories such as *The Peddler of Swaffham* by Kevin Crossley-Holland, *The Reluctant Dragon* by Kenneth Grahame,

and *Sir Cedric* by Roy Gerrard yielded excellent fodder for responses to literature (see figure 6). Sometimes a response took the form of a piece of creative writing (see figure 7).

The value of texts from the primary and junior sections of the library can't be underestimated. We examined the wealth of historical information in the illustrations and content of books such as *A Medieval Feast* by Alike. In this way my visual learners, including Mark and Jeff, were able to obtain information without feeling ashamed about using a "baby book." It was gratifying afterwards to see students of all levels using the books to obtain information. Some of them used the "picture book" format to record and present their information (see figure 8).

Becoming Multi-Draft Writers

When we began the writing workshop, quiet and conferencing areas were established. Rules governing the use of the hall were also established. It always took a few minutes for the students to decide where to start and where to sit. Most were consistently very productive, while others, as one would expect, moderately so. For some, reminders to stay on task were required but for the most part, I was pleased with their application and effort. They were truly linking the various elements of an integrated language arts program together, and were busy talking, reading, drawing, writing, and most of all, striving to satisfy themselves. They showed a desire to improve their drafts, and we made a list of criteria to improve their writing that included:

- reviewing for clarity
- editing for grammatical errors
- adding description and detail
- 'painting' what you see
- adding exclamations, expressions to try to make the writing alive.

I asked them questions to nudge them towards deciding what improvements to make. I would normally conference with them whenever they hit some type of road block, or after their final peer editing. The rest of the time I was circulating, lending a hand whenever it was needed. Conferencing does take time, but it is

essential to learning. Students need to evaluate their own work in order to take responsibility for improving their writing themselves.

Did all the individuals and groups function smoothly at all times? No, but nothing ever does when dealing with diverse personalities. They certainly improved as the project progressed. Group work helped them to manage their time effectively. We had decided that they would be evaluated on their participation in their groups, in addition to their writing. Some self-policing was done as I heard comments such as, "Hey! You shouldn't be talking about that now. You'll lose points!" Many who had been blasé about marks in the past were now concerned! Obviously, their interest in their project translated into interest in their evaluation, and most did care.

After a few days, I only needed to say "stations," and the majority were on task in minutes. The class seemed to run itself! Even on the days I was away, it apparently ran smoothly, which I took as a sign of success. The students looked forward to their station work, and frequently asked to do it. At this stage of the project, a typical entry from my log read:

Lots of questions as to who would make the arrows, swords and how. Put these questions for general discussion and sharing tomorrow. Today I needed more of me so I could get around and check their progress - especially the few who like to hide. Check on Costa who struggles to read and write. Mark has done a writeup on his sword. He needed lots of guidance and leading questions - a little like drawing teeth - but it's coming along. He and Costa were actually working well together!

Other remarks I jotted down pertained to the organization itself such as the need to keep their work in their folders and the maintenance of the quiet and conferencing areas.

Committed to Learning

As the unit progressed, it was clear my students were getting things accomplished. They were more involved and working harder than I had ever seen before. Students were discussing their topics with each other, as well as with me,

and stretching their imaginations. They were trying to write different text types and inspiring each other when they shared their work.

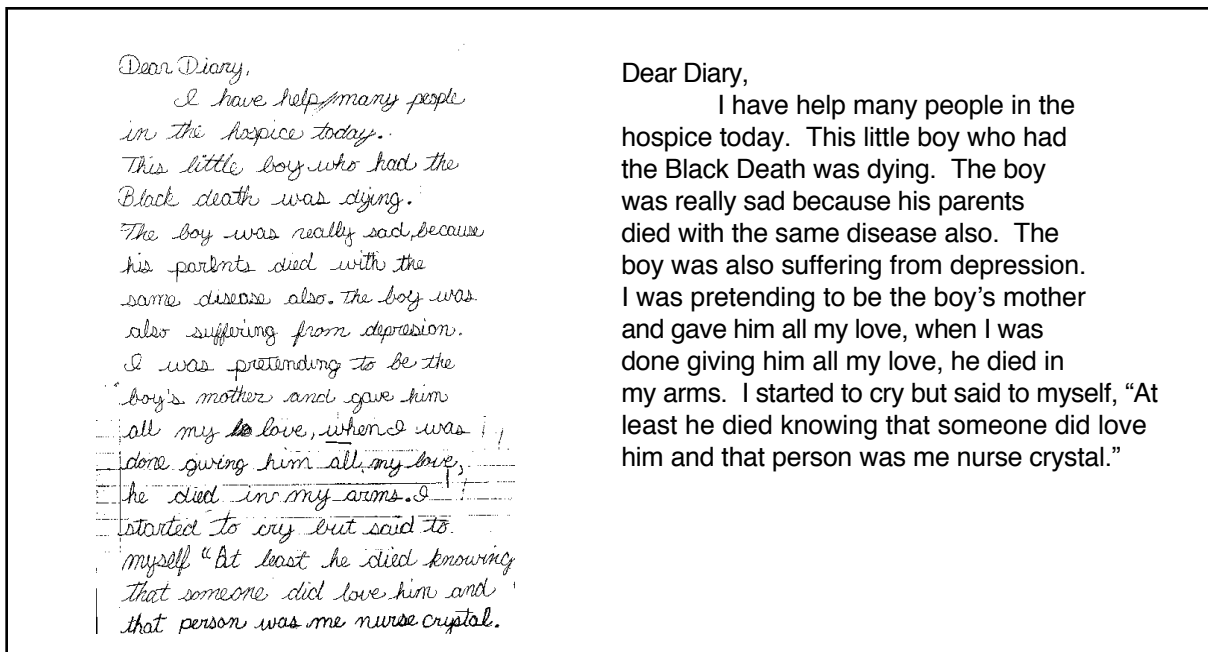


figure 9

There were many moments that a

teacher savours. Jeff and Matt, both reluctant writers, one of them who came from a special class, kept working after the bell. When told it was lunch, they actually said, "That was fun!" This from students who needed lots of help to stay focused. Samantha, too, kept on working after the bell as she stated, "I want to develop my story." The following exchange I had with Bianca once again, *after* the bell.

- Bianca: This story is better than before.
Joan: Why do you think that?
Bianca: Well, it just is. It's much better, more interesting.
Joan: Oh? What Makes it better?
Bianca: I've changed things. I've added things and removed things.
Joan: Oh - you've edited.
Bianca: Yes - now it's good.

One of my reluctant editors was learning how to edit and was well pleased with her efforts!

Another important moment was when Stephanie asked me for some specific vocabulary we'd encountered in one of our books. Melissa, usually a careless writer, had proofread her own work and found sections that didn't please her. She located

her misplaced, omitted words, repetitions, and poorly expressed phrases. She

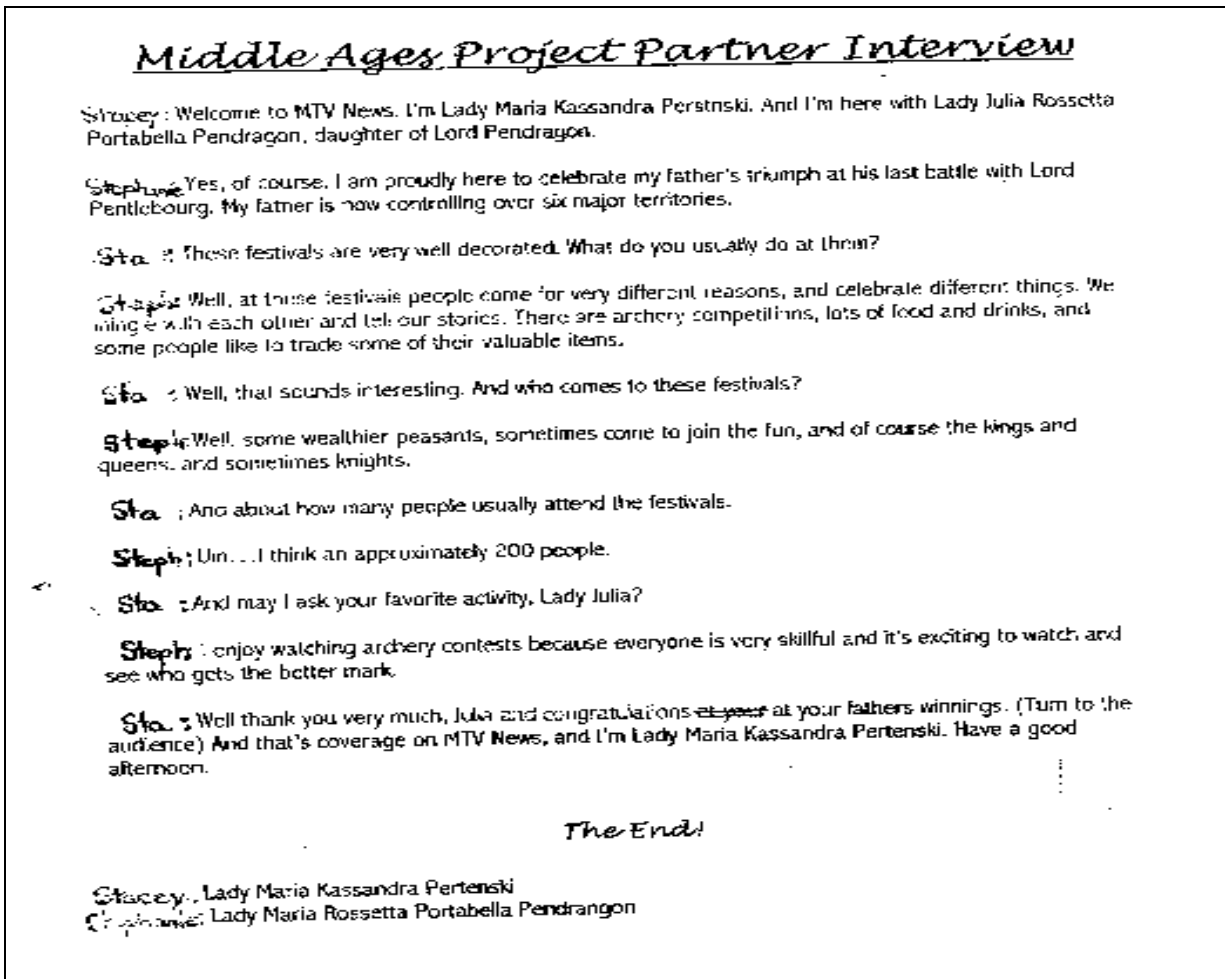


figure 10

became observant and critical of her work and was showing a pride that up until now had been lacking.

I also observed that a number of students had incorporated some of their research information into their writing, giving it a depth and realism. Characters died from the Black Death, slept on pallets, and ate bannock (see figure 9).

Reading and Producing Visual Texts

We were all working with visual texts. Some students employed techniques we had used earlier with some of the supplementary material. We had drawn scenes

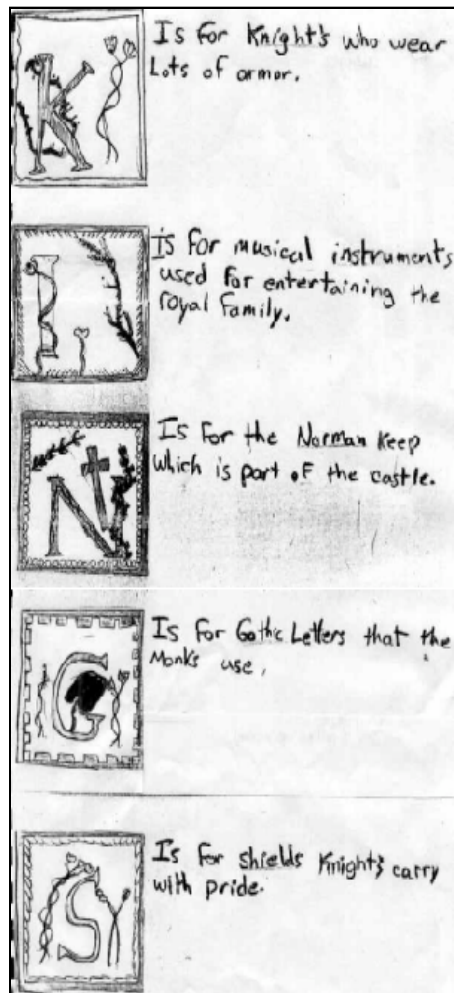


figure 11

and put them into context. Illustrations had been taken from familiar stories and students had explained how they fit into the historical context as well as the literary context. We had examined pictures for descriptive detail and created stories around them. It was rewarding when students used pictures or parts of scenes as points of departure for their own writing. A picture of a fair led to Stephanie's and Stacey's interview (see figure 10). Using visual texts was another form of reading that developed my students' powers of observation and knowledge of historical detail as well. It also gave them a concrete base with which to start and the comfort of using a familiar technique. They felt secure with what they were doing and were prepared to branch out.

Visual texts played another role in this project.

The artwork and classroom decoration not only created an atmosphere that affected the children's

attitudes but it also affected their writing. A note in my log for March 27th read:

Today Serge submitted one of his poems. It's an acronym on kings with well-chosen words. Not only that he set up the initial letters in a beautiful manuscript format.

We hadn't discussed manuscript letters, but there were some examples on the wall as one group had researched monks. This example showed me the carry-over from the surroundings (see figure 11). It also shows that learning is going on even though we may not be consciously aware of it.

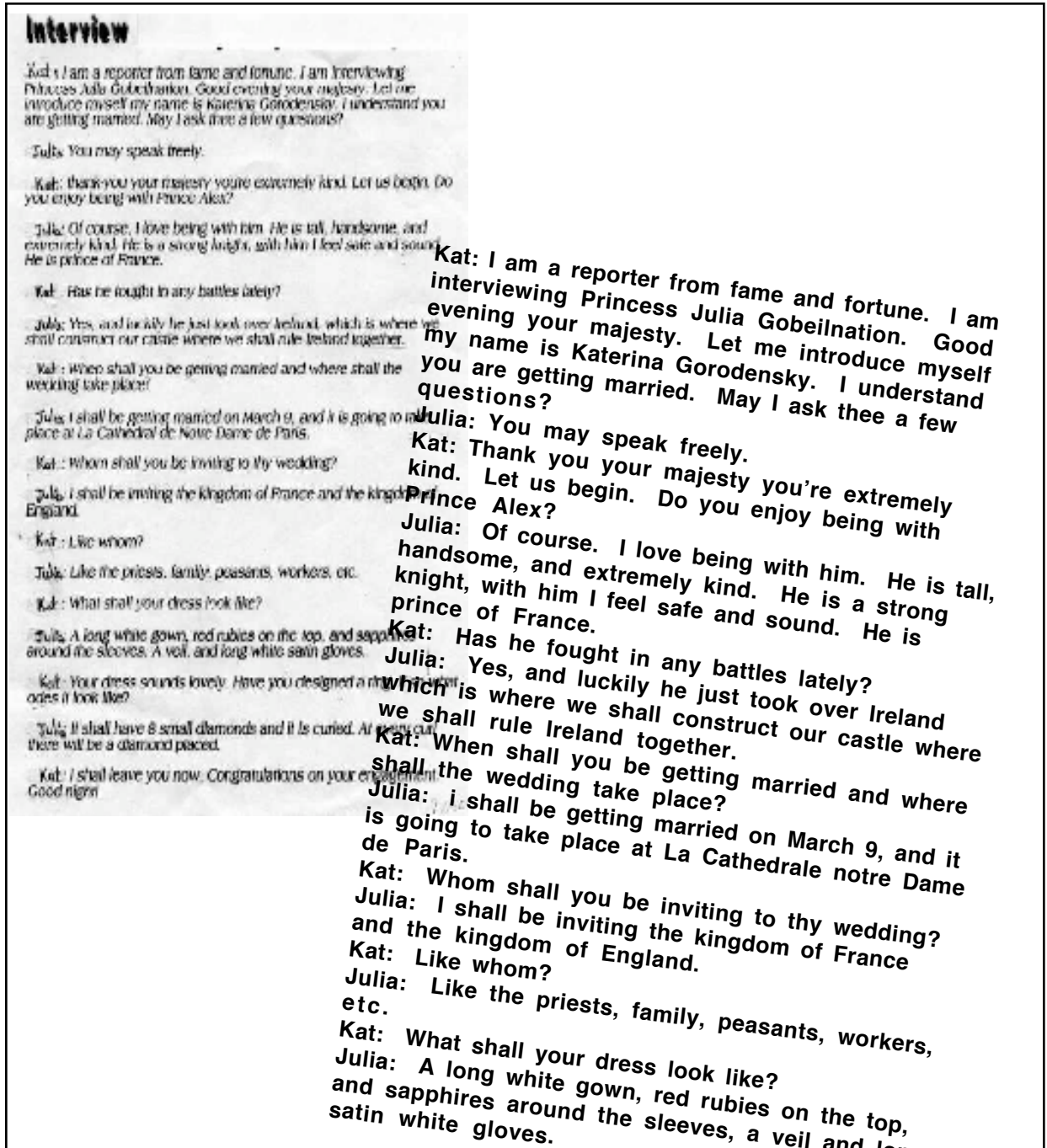


figure 12

Sharing Their Work

I was interested in the collaborative work and delighted with the results. Perhaps, it was because it combined two aspects my class did so well - movement and talking! Some of the groups opted to present their work to the class. There were

various scenarios ranging from a princess preparing for her marriage in Notre Dame de Paris (see figure 12) to a fine lady attending a great celebration and fair in honour of her husband's great victory in battle. The language in many of these dramatic skits has the register of medieval English.

There was an on-the-spot interview with a knight on the battlefield. The "reporter" in this case had specifically dressed up in flannels, shirt, tie, and vest, quite unlike his normal attire. Jeff good-naturedly took all kinds of ribbing until it was time for his interview, and then it was apparent to all that he had taken his role of a reporter stepping back in time very seriously. Not the most assiduous or strongest student by far, it was clearly a special day for him! All of the presentations reflected variety and creativity, and everyone enjoyed them immensely.

Going Cross-Disciplinary

What did give me a thrill was when their excitement carried over into French. Their French teacher decided to capitalize on my students' enthusiasm and do a mini-project on the Middle Ages theme. The two grade-six classes were streamed which meant that this French class consisted of about half of my class. The French teacher discovered to her delight and mine, that my students were transferring their knowledge of the Middle Ages into French and asking for all types of vocabulary, some of which the teacher herself had to research! Their enthusiasm was contagious, and they were very involved making suggestions and volunteering information. The interest, excitement, and involvement had transcended reading novels about the Middle Ages. They reveled in their learning and were delighted to help and to explain their new knowledge to their peers. They probably enjoyed flaunting their expertise a little as well. Their immersion in the content and our collaborative work seemed to be paying dividends. It seemed that the old adage "the more you know, the more you want to know" was true. To that I would add, the more

you want to share as well.

The medieval theme lent itself to going cross-curricular in other areas. We kept finding more artwork to produce. As well as the "Knights' Gallery" and "Hall of Shields," we were kept busy with murals, "stained glass" windows and jars, and gargoyles made of milk or juice containers. All types of links could be made between these and the reading/writing process for one inspires the other.

Math entered our project. The students enjoyed learning and for the majority, mastering the Roman system. They now understood the meaning of these symbols used as chapters in some books and on watches and clocks! They also came up with other places where the numerals were used such as on cornerstones and at the end of old movies. The children found more examples to decode. Old terminology such as barter, a score as in four score and three, and changing a number into its dozen and fraction equivalent provided us with other math activities. There were also discussions of the use of such abbreviations as A.D., B.C., and B.P.

Perimeter and area was put in the context of cathedrals and castles. The volume of defense walls was calculated after being given dimensions, and the average number of stones required to build them was determined after being told the volume of an average stone. We calculated distance by leagues (about 3 miles) and measurement by hands (about 4 inches) and converted them to metric. It also is a terrific time to introduce chess with its strategy and deductive reasoning.

Music, too, provided a link to the times and increased our understanding of the life of the people. Music played an important role in life during the Middle Ages. The great cathedrals needed music to soar upward towards the lofty vaulted ceilings to restore and inspire souls. Choirs were required with well-trained voices leading to the formation of many of the great choir schools. Exposure to the sound of boy sopranos of the Vienna Boys Choir or some of the great English choirs was a new experience for many. As Tom remarked, "That's a boy? Whoa!" He was expressing the amazement of many of the students that boys could sing like that. In the great monasteries and abbeys, monks developed chants as part of their

religious observances. As Alex said, "Weird!" when he learned that one modern recording of Gregorian chants topped the hit parade a few years back.

Minstrels were the communication link between castles and by way of their songs, ballads and recitations, lords and ladies caught up on the news or found their deeds immortalized in verse. Here was a great place to try our choral speaking and experiment with our own newsy ballads and rhymes. Some students began to include some repetition for emphasis in their own poetry. They related to the medieval townsfolk for whom music brought some much needed levity to their lives at fairs and other gatherings. They realized from the simple tunes that these people liked to "move" too. Jeff and Costa's toes were tapping in time with the medieval music we listened to. We heard different kinds of medieval music, -- religious, secular and folk. Music added another dimension and often inspired the children to try different forms of self-expression.

To link the various aspects of the project together, we watched the video *Castle* by David Macauley, which explained why a castle was built and how and what the requirements were. The jobs of the various craftsmen and labourers were clearly shown. The video relied on a combination of animation and live-action documentary to tell the tale and facts of the construction of a Welsh castle. *Cathedral* also by Macauley follows the same format. There is lots of scope for discussing why the filmmaker used these methods and their advantages and disadvantages. These videos can be used to develop media literacy -- the powers of observation and critical appraisal -- as well as to discover information.

The same is true of the last film we watched, *Ivanhoe*. Although dated, the children noticed the use of sound effects to accompany the action and to add atmosphere and mood. We discussed the evolution of character through dress, speech and actions and how we came to label them as worthy, good, or evil. We took note of camera angles, settings, and costumes and discussed how we knew it was filmed long ago. The opening background looks very unrealistic today, yet the students were soon caught up in the action of a good story. It has some lovely

scenes of tournaments, banquets and storming a castle and correct language suitable for classroom use throughout! The students loved the little details such as the table manners and especially wiping ones' fingers on the attendant hounds at the table. Critiques of films opened up new areas for writing and thinking critically. Once again favorite scenes were recounted or drawn and poems written. We also discussed the different portrayals of Robin Hood in this film in which he occurs briefly, and some of his more modern incarnations such as in *Robin, Prince of Thieves*. Analyzing videos provided another means of developing literacy.

As a way of summarizing all the activities we did in this project, I have constructed an approximate time line. It looks much more tidy than it actually was, since one activity grew out of another, and many of them overlapped and were done simultaneously. This is not a plan that I made in advance, but what resulted from following my students' interests and decisions about the project.

Time Line of Middle Ages Project

<u>Main Activities</u>	<u>Overlapping Extended Activities</u>
Read literature set in the Middle Ages	Further reading of literature set in Middle Ages
Art: madeportcullis, sheilds	More artwork: murals, stained-glass windows, gargoyles
Responding to literature	
Writing stations	Math problems that arose during research process
Research Project	
Presentations in many format: interviews, lecture, plays	Music: listening to and researching historical context of medieval music
	French: extension of project
	Analysis of media texts on Middle Ages

Impact on Students

It is important for students to reflect on what they have learned and how they have learned. I asked my class to write an evaluation of this project at various stages. Their responses were very gratifying. I found they had noticed and appreciated the fact the class was decorated. They thanked me yet, it was their work which was everywhere. More importantly, they showed great insights into how they learned.

Stephanie mentioned how she enjoyed the decor...

I like the gargoyles on the stairs (we expanded to the front entrance of the school!), the shield hall and the thing over our door. It really inspires us and I think the environment makes us produce better work on the Middle Ages.

They also enjoyed the writing stations, as Hannah reported,

It's very nice of our teacher to let us do this stuff because other teachers wouldn't. It's like free time.' But the same student wrote, 'Thanks for letting us do these stations. It is an adventure to discover where my writing will take me and our class looks glorious like a medieval castle.

Alex, who didn't like writing, recorded that the stations were "okay," but that he did "cool things" in art. He also felt that the presentations were "really cool!" Not a strong student, his research and presentation were excellent. He revealed a side of himself of which the class and I had been previously unaware. It was a delight to see him feel so good about himself.

Kyle wrote:

My favourite activity was the stations because you had to pretend you were in the Middle Ages and making stories, poems or interviews. I was most satisfied with my story entitled The Word Doctor because it feels so real.

Stephanie wrote that she liked "the stations because. . .it gives us more independence in our work."

Judith was quite taken with the poetry aspect:

The part of it that I liked the most was the two poems. They are called The Princess and Sir Rowly. I kind of amazed myself. I thought 'WOW! I can do good poems.' This has helped me realize I am good in poems. Now I am writing poetry about everyday things.

Some said they liked working with a partner or doing an interview together

but would not do it again. I was a little surprised at that, but they felt they had their own ideas and wanted to tell their own stories. They didn't like altering their decisions to accommodate their partner's views.

Feedback sometimes comes from unexpected places. One of my students the following year confided that she wanted to be in my class because of all the "neat" things she'd seen and heard about from her friends the previous year. Frequently, in sixth grade, former students, now in secondary schools, come to visit. This group was no different, and they asked if the class was doing the theme and proceeded to recollect all the various components of their project. It was still alive in all their minds. Aaron described the impact of the project on him.

This was a great time for me because I learnt many new things and it was fun. That is what made it so interesting, having it be fun to learn. For, me at least, if something is fun I rarely forget it and that is why I am actually able to write this. Another thing which was very interesting was that I did not just learn about the Middle Ages, but I learnt about myself as well. I learnt how to work on a team when I have to, even if though I cannot stand it. I discovered that I like to be my own boss and not be bossed by somebody else.

Everything has its day - so do castles with all their trappings. Better to end while everyone is still enthusiastic, rather than flog an idea to death. After a few months, our medieval adventure was over and the decor altered. When our castle came down, someone in the hall remarked, "Our class isn't different any more," but another voice piped up, "Sure it is -- it's still special inside -- it's what we do that's special, and we still have Miss Crossley." I was pleased to be sure, but I was also very proud of what we'd accomplished together.

It was hard work and required lots of organization, not obvious at first glance. Their results whether poetry, stories, interviews or presentations were superior to what they had hitherto produced. They had enjoyed and become involved in their own learning processes. Many of the things they had learned were not accounted for on the formal evaluation schemes we are required to use. There was no place to record the development of a passion, the sense of unity and camaraderie that developed in the class, the positive attitude towards school, the development of

research and presentation skills, the enjoyment of the presentations and interviews. All the while, my students were learning and loving it.

Was it worth it all? Would I do it again? Certainly! One of the reasons for the success of this project was that I, too, was enthused about the topic and spent a lot of time rooting out stories, organizing, and planning. Although projects must be student-centred, the enthusiasm of the teacher must not be neglected. I became a co-inquirer as I found out a lot about the Middle Ages alongside my students and participated fully in their discoveries.

Experiencing the Love of Learning

At the conclusion of the project, I reflected upon what had transpired in the classroom. My group of perfunctory writers had evolved into multi-draft writers, enthusiastic about and critical of their own work. How had this happened? I wasn't quite sure but they certainly had become ignited by the theme. We had developed prior knowledge of the topic through their enthusiasm for the literature we shared and had experienced the Middle Ages throughout many other areas of the curriculum. All this engendered a sense of community and shared knowledge. I believe that teacher enthusiasm and involvement is also important, and I was certainly sharing and learning along with them. All the varied aspects of the Middle Ages that appealed to this age group, -- the factual, fantastic, and the romanticism -- were contributing factors. Certainly, my students did develop a passion for the theme, and it is this passion which is essential for learning. I considered myself fortunate that the entire group, to varying degrees, was interested in this topic. There was some indefinable lure, some magic that allowed for real growth in literacy.

The project was very child-centered and cross-curricular. The students collaborated in many different ways, using each other as resources and support. They learned how to organize their time, use the research process, stretch their imaginations, and experiment with various text types. Every individual was part of a learning community. No one had a monopoly on success. Different students shone

at different times in a variety of ways. A true sense of unity and camaraderie had been created in the class, and this sense of belonging and contributing engendered a marvelous feeling. I felt privileged to have experienced it. Not only did they learn how to learn, but they were learning to love learning for its own sake. If they carry this with them into the future, I will be well pleased.

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