

Kids Writing for Kids

In Cedar Falls, Iowa, fourth graders look at their hometown from a "kid's eye-view" and publish a community brochure

BY DIANE McCARTY

Have you ever marveled at how the old can appear new when it's looked at by young, eager, impressionable eyes? How can these eyes can make the ordinary seem extraordinary? That's exactly what happened in my classroom when my students took on a hometown project.

When my family and I visited a colleague, Jan Segerstrom, in Jackson, Wyoming, on our summer vacation, she had some magazines by our bedside. I picked one up and discovered that it had been created by her middle school talented and gifted students. It was a magazine designed to promote tourism in their area. After I learned a little bit about how Jan had gone about the task of creating the publication with her students, I brought a copy of the magazine home and put it away.

The school year started, and I had a couple of interesting projects going; I was pleased at how the year had begun, and I didn't think too much more about Jan's magazine. Then Computer Learning Month (October) rolled around. Our school technology person (who happened to be one of my student's parents) asked the faculty to become involved in a computer project to promote the theme. I felt I should support his efforts, so I pulled out the Jackson Hole magazine. Maybe we could adapt this as a brochure to fit *our* community.

But a nagging voice kept telling me, "Your students are only fourth graders. How could they write about our community in order to "sell" it? They have limited computer word processing skills. Why get yourself into such a project? The computer lab is

all the way on the other side of the building and it's shared with middle school and high school students. Besides, Cedar Falls isn't a big tourist site. What does it have to offer?"

All in favor. My first step in making the project reality was to call the Cedar Falls Chamber of Commerce. We would need financial support to produce a finished product. I visited the head of the Department of Tourism and shared my vision of a brochure that would promote our community. I felt that my students might have a whole new outlook on their community that would be fresh and appealing to others. They loved it! The department committed \$500 to the project and wanted to contact a local printer; too. Things were looking up!

Now, I had to inform the students about the combined reading/writing/social studies project. I introduced the idea of a community brochure and started to brainstorm a list of places in the town that might interest the students. As good writers, they asked, "Who is our audience?"

We decided it had to be kids; kids of parents who are thinking about making Cedar Falls their home; kids of executives who might be coming to town; kids in motel rooms in town spending the night. Kids writing for kids.

The bus tour. The Chamber of Commerce arranged for the students to go on a bus tour of our town. I was a little apprehensive; I didn't know how the kids would respond to 90 minutes on a bus with a running commentary presented by the local historian, but it was a practical next step in the process of acquiring information.

It turned out that the tour was the best

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A "Bit" of Cedar Falls History

Cedar Falls was founded by a man named William Sturgis in 1840. He made a cabin by the Cedar River. Then he took the first cedar logs from along the river and made a room. He planned to make more along the river but he was unsuccessful. A few years later, he lost some money and had to sell Cedar Falls to Griffith Sturgis. He sold it to Oliver and John Greenough in 1847.



The children were obviously very impressed with the fact that the town was originally named "Sturgis Falls," for William Sturgis, (above), founder.

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Diane McCarty teaches fourth grade at Malcolm Price Lab School at the University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, IA.

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“Every chamber of commerce in the state will receive a copy. It will be used in many more ways than we ever dreamed!”

thing to do to excite the students about the project. They had a purpose when they were “listening to” and “looking at” their community. After all, they would be writing about some of these places. We drove to the spot where Cedar Falls was started by the Cedar River and learned how the mills began the local industry in our area. We saw the first school site; we talked about the Ice House Museum and the Broom Factory Restaurant and their initial purposes. Then we traveled down Main Street, which has many of its original buildings and observed their dates (they’re from the early 1900’s).

In the meantime, the Department of Tourism found a printer who wanted to support the project by donating its time and services to print 5,000 copies of the brochure. The project was ready to begin. I was nervous, but I’ve learned that when students have authentic work to do, these types of projects never fail.

Now to the work. The list of places the students wanted to write about was complete. It was condensed from 85 items to 20 by vote. There would be one historian team, and the rest of the students would be paired to write about current establishments and events in the community. Each child specified his or her top three subject choices, and from there, the pairs were made.

Next, I prepared the children for writing by reading a packet supplied by the Chamber of Commerce about the history of our county. The packet contained far too much information for any student to digest, so we read it in small increments; the students had to read for only 10 minutes about any historic site that interested them. Then, for 10 minutes, they shared what they discovered. We did this for a few days, and their excitement about writing grew.

I also wanted my kids to hear a story similar to what they would be doing, so I read an article from the Wyoming magazine. We discussed it and discovered what made it a good article. We talked about different forms the articles could take to add zest to our brochure. We then wrote a “rap” about our local library as a class. We liked it so much, we kept it in our final brochure.

Production process. Computer skills at a fourth grade level are limited. I simply taught home row keys, and we began composing our stories on the computer. The lab was available for me for 45 minutes each day, and this worked out just about the right amount of time. It took almost two weeks for each committee to construct meaningful short articles about local outdoor fun, Sturgis Falls Days, the Hearst Center for the Arts, the Black Hawk Rollerdrome, the new recreation center, survey results on great places to eat, the Little Red Schoolhouse, a “bit” of Cedar Falls History, etc. The students loved the ease of doing revisions on the computer.

Some students, of course, finished their stories earlier than others, so they began the illustrations. The students’ drawings could represent any of the articles that were being written. (We did them all as pencil sketches because we weren’t sure what the printer required.)

The articles were then poured from 12 disks to one, which I then loaded onto the hard drive in my classroom. This is where final proofreading and editing took place. Articles were arranged into a logical layout, and they were checked to be sure all information was accurate. We were ready for the printing process to begin.

The graphic artist that the printer assigned to help with our brochure really “caught” our ideas. After many discussions and visits, she and I decided on the final layout. She was very creative in the design and particular in every detail. She used almost all the illustrations that were created. She even ordered special paper that looked like it had crayon flecks. The brochure is a masterpiece!

Total involvement. This story could stop here, but it doesn’t. We turned the printing process of this brochure into an educational opportunity for the students. The fourth graders and their parents were invited to the printing plant after school to see their brochure being created. The tour started with the printer’s computer and included showing how the students’ artwork was scanned, how color was added and how the



"Cedar Falls Tour, A 'Kid's Eye-View' of Our Hometown" unfolds into a colorful poster that describes everything kids might want to see and do in this Iowa town. The brochure is available at local banks, real estate offices and in Chambers of Commerce throughout the state.

whole thing was printed. The students heard about career opportunities in printing and learned about the work necessary to complete this project.

The brochures were "wet," so we were unable to get one into our hands until the next day. The printer personally brought 25 brochures to the classroom so that each student could have one to take home that very day. We immediately had a sustained silent reading time and spread out around the room to read our work. It was the first opportunity some of the students had to read their peers' articles. The Chamber of Commerce sent a congratulations cake for us to enjoy as we read.

Superb circulation. The 5,000 copies are going fast. Each student in my class

received at least five brochures for his or her family. A local bank asked for 500 copies to put in packets given to new accounts. Professors at the University of Northern Iowa (where our lab school is located) have asked if they could include it with their interviewing materials. They hope it will entice prospective colleagues and show them what our community offers to their families. Local businesses love it because it's free advertising for them. Realtors think it's great, too. And every Chamber of Commerce in the state will receive a copy. It will be used in many more ways than we ever dreamed!

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