

## *Communities of Learners: From New York to Chile*

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***Me alegré mucho cuando recibí tu mensaje, oye amiga o amigo***

Eiden Saez, Padre las Casas, Chile

**T**he first letters arrived via the Internet from Chile! The students in Peggy Reardon's Spanish class, at Pocantico Hills Central School in Sleepy Hollow, NY, were excited. Antonio received his letter, and as he walked back to his desk he began to read the greeting aloud to himself. His face lit-up as he read, *Hola Antonio*. He returned to his desk and, like the other students, tried to understand his letter. The first line was hard. What did the word *sorteo* [lottery] mean? He needed help from the dictionary or the teacher to find out. Many of the other letters also included the word *sorteo* because the Chilean teacher had put the names of the students from New York in a hat for each Chilean student to choose. Was *Karis* a boy or a girl? Her full name, *Karis Andrea Mellado Fabres* gave Antonio a clue. And her description, *soy delgada, de ojos café oscuro* [*I am thin, with dark brown eyes*] helped confirm that *Karis* was a girl's name. She told him her parents' names, Hugo Mellado Otarola and Sonia Fabres Jimenes, and that she liked to listen to music and to dance.

## Connecting Communities via E-Mail

This e-mail letter exchange is part of a unit on Chile designed by Peggy Reardon, in collaboration with Mari Haas, a teacher-educator from Teachers College, Columbia University, for Peggy's 7th grade Spanish class. The students have been studying Spanish for three years, since 5th grade. Peggy chose this particular class to work with because they are an active group and do not often get the opportunity to participate in special projects or to go on fieldtrips. She felt that this unit on Chile would be engaging for them and could channel their energy into an exciting learning experience. The students live north of New York City where children from several small towns all attend a pre-K-to-grade-8 public school. The students come from a variety of backgrounds. Most are from middle-class families and about 27% are African American, Latino, or Asian. There are 19 students in the Spanish class. They study Spanish five days a week for 44 minutes each day. The language curriculum follows the text, *Viva el español* (Belisle-Chatterjee et al., 1990) from 5th to 8th grade, but Peggy often plans special thematic units. Her emphasis on teaching language thematically comes from her participation in the National Endowment for the Humanities/Teachers College, Columbia University grant-funded project called Project Pluma.

Project Pluma gave Peggy the opportunity to study the history and culture of Mexico and creative writing at Teachers College in New York City and in Mexico. After teaching her Pluma curriculum project, a unit on Diego Rivera, to an eighth-grade class, she was interested in creating other thematic units that integrate language, content, and culture. Mari, a K-8 methods instructor at Teachers College and the Director of Project Pluma, has worked with Peggy for the last several years on teaching strategies for thematic, content-centered lessons. The Chile unit combines activities designed by Peggy and Mari as well as activities from a thematic text, *The Language of Folk Art* (Haas, 1996). The teaching strategies and student activities were written to let the students learn about Chile in the classroom as well as through interaction with Chilean people. The emphasis in this project on using language as a tool to communicate with native speakers of Spanish exemplifies the fifth goal of the National Foreign Language Standards, *Communities* (National Standards, 1996).

## The Communities Goal

This goal takes the perspective that in our global society today, with an economy that is more and more based on information, technology, and service, students who study languages other than English will be better able to participate in the multilingual communities within their own neighborhoods and states as well as around the world. It is a goal that is facilitated when students complete long sequences of language study that provide them with many opportunities to use the language. The Connections Goal is made up of two standards: the first asks students to apply what they have learned by using the target language in the classroom as well as beyond the school setting; the second standard reinforces the notion that because knowing other languages gives students access to information and people from the target culture they are able to participate in many rich and enjoyable opportunities that contribute to their becoming life-long learners. Projects that stress the application of certain language skills give students meaningful experiences with the language and culture. These include: communicating with people who speak the target language through e-mail, telephone, or letters; interacting with peers around a language or cultural topic; planning a trip (real or imaginary) to a target country; playing games, and listening to music or viewing art work from the target culture. These activities will help them understand the interdependence of people throughout the world as well as expand the avenues of information open to them. Although the goal of *Communities* incorporates the other standards, especially those of *Communication* and *Cultures*, it is an extremely important comprehensive goal because it allows students to put their language learning into action and to experience "the power of language" (National Standards, 1996) first hand.

When Peggy and Mari were planning the unit, the Internet connection to Chile was the obvious activity that would let the students "leave" the classroom and connect with students in Chile. As the planning progressed they discovered additional resources in the school, the community, and nearby that could also enrich the project. Therefore, the National Foreign Language Standards goal of *Communities* was emphasized throughout this project in a variety of ways. Progress toward the goal was manifest when the Pocantico students exchanged e-mail letters with Chilean students, interviewed a first-grade teacher in their own school who is originally from Chile and the author of a reading passage about Chile, and visited a Chilean bakery in the village nearby. They also sang a song from

Chile, learned about *arpilleras* (see Figure 5) and made their own *arpillera*-inspired collages.

## Planning the Project

Together, Peggy and Mari outlined the project, incorporating activities from the *Language of Folk Art*, creating additional activities, and shaping the unit to the needs of this class. Peggy was concerned that the students continue to learn the vocabulary and structures they would be responsible for on the exam at the end of the school year. She wanted to see how a thematic unit could reinforce the school language curriculum and how new ways of using language (the e-mail letters and communication with unfamiliar native speakers) would enhance the students' learning. The connection between Chilean students and Pocantico students was particularly exciting for Peggy. Both Mari and Peggy were curious about what the students would learn about their own culture and the culture of the Chilean people through their participation in this unit (a focus of the Comparisons Goal). Mari was glad to have the opportunity to watch an excellent teacher in action, to observe the teaching strategies she used and the ways in which she facilitated students' language use inside and outside the classroom. Since teaching a thematic unit was still new for Peggy, Mari's presence in the classroom several times each week gave them both the time to reflect on the methodology and to learn from each other.

The project was a true collaboration in several ways as diverse communities of educators worked together. The first collaboration involved Peggy and Mari, a classroom teacher and a university-based educator. Through this collaboration, Peggy and Mari strengthened their sense of community that had begun during Project Pluma. Even though they had had many positive experiences together in the past, during the Chile unit Mari was a more frequent observer and an occasional teacher in Peggy's classroom. It took a lot of trust on Peggy's part to open her classroom to this scrutiny and to allow the teaching to unfold as she tried new techniques and incorporated successful, tried and true activities.

While teaching the unit, Peggy also worked with other teachers at her school. The computer teacher assisted with the logistics of sending and receiving e-mail messages, and the art teacher explored, with the students, ways to think about designing the culminating folk-art project. When Peggy realized that the first-grade teacher was originally from Chile, she

invited her to visit the class. Arranging for the interview required Peggy and the first-grade teacher to switch classes. This sense of community spirit at Pocantico Hills School was evident throughout the Chile project. The other teachers were interested in the project and excited to facilitate and contribute to it in any way possible. It allowed all the teachers involved to step out of their traditional roles and teach from a new perspective. They each learned something new about their colleague's teaching field, thus strengthening the Pocantico Hills School community.

## Folk Art

*Unidad 6* in *The Language of Folk Art* focuses on Chile and uses an *arpillera* (an appliqué picture made with scraps of colored material sewed on a burlap background) of a small town to teach about this South American country. Coincidentally, this chapter added yet another layer to the focus on the Standards goal of *Communities*. The context of the chapter is created by the *arpillera* and the language lessons expand on the elements that make up a community in a small South American town. The reading passage about Melipilla, a small Chilean town, gives the students a sense of what growing up in a small town was like and allows them to compare and contrast Melipilla with their own town. The students learn Spanish as they are studying the geography of Chile; they learn what towns and cities are like (the stores, services, and places of interest), and how *arpilleras* are made. As she prepared to teach the unit, Peggy first worked on familiarizing herself with the activities in this chapter. Then she started to explore the Internet to find a connection with a school in Chile. Previously, she had researched Argentina, Peru, and Colombia and worked with an 8th-grade class on a keypal project (Reardon, 1995). She used her experience from that project to begin her exploration of a link with Chile and eventually made contact with Elena Herrera, a teacher at the Dario Salas School in Padre Las Casas, a small town near Temuco, Chile.<sup>1</sup> Elena and Peggy began corresponding through e-mail (see Figure 1). They decided to have three student letter exchanges. The first message would discuss the students' appearance, their family, and their likes and dislikes. The second would describe their schools, school subjects (Peggy's students were interested to know if the Chilean students studied English or other foreign languages), and their interests (sports and music). They planned to include a description of their towns in the third exchange.

Date: Wed, 27 Mar/Thurs. 28 Mar. 96 10:56:29  
From: Elena Herrera A. <Coordinador@dsalas.plasca.plaza.cl>  
To: Peggy Reardon <poco@transit.nyser.net>  
Subject: =?iso-8859-1 ?Q?Comunicaci=F3n?=>

Hola Peggy

Te saluda Elena, Coordinadora de la Red en la Escuela Darío Salas. Soy profesora de Educación General Básica, coordinadora de la sala de computación en el proyecto Enlaces.

Nuestra escuela está ubicada en la comuna de Padre las Casas en la novena región. Tenemos lugares de verano preciosos, como el balneario de Licanray, Villarrica, Pucón, Cerro Qielol etc.

Tú me dices y comenzaremos a intercambiar información. Deseo tener comunicación con ustedes para hablar de los temas que planteastes, trabajaría con alumnos de 7 año.

Saludos desde Chile

Espero me contestes pronto. Me despido deseándote un gran éxito en este año.

Elena Herrera Alveal

Figure 1. A combination of two letters from the computer teacher in Chile.

## Beginnings

And so the unit began. On the first day Peggy asked the students to list, in English, any facts they knew about Chile. She wanted to gauge their background knowledge about the country. As it turned out, their knowledge was limited to facts about the geography. They said that Chile was a long, skinny, Spanish-speaking country on the Pacific coast of South America, with the Andes Mountains running through it. Peggy then changed the sign hanging in the front of the classroom from the "English" side to the "Español" side (Curtain and Pesola, 1994, p. 300). Using a large map of South America, Peggy and her puppet friends presented a dialogue about Chile. One puppet was in a hurry to leave for a trip to Chile. The other puppet began asking questions about the country:

1. <i>Hola Miguelito, ¿qué pasa?</i>	Hi, Mikey, What's happening?
2. <i>Pues, tengo prisa.</i>	Well, I'm in a hurry. Leave me alone!
<i>¡Déjame en paz!</i>	
1. <i>¿Adónde vas?</i>	Where are you going?
2. <i>Voy a Chile en una hora.</i>	I'm going to Chile in an hour.
1. <i>¿Dónde está Chile, en los Estados Unidos?</i>	Where is Chile, in the US?
2. <i>Me vuelves loco. Está en Sudamérica.</i>	You drive me crazy! It's in South America.
1. <i>¿Está cerca de un océano?</i>	Is it near an ocean?
2. <i>Por supuesto, el Océano Pacífico.</i>	Of course, the Pacific Ocean.
1. <i>¿Cómo es Chile?</i>	What's Chile like?
2. <i>Es largo y estrecho.</i>	It's long and narrow.
1. <i>¿Cuál es la capital?</i>	What is the capital?
2. <i>Es Santiago.</i>	It's Santiago.

From the dialogue, Peggy created a Total Physical Response (TPR) sequence using the map and giving commands to the students such as:

<i>Toca Chile.</i>	Touch Chile.
<i>Enséñame el país al norte de Chile.</i>	Show me the country to the north of Chile.
<i>Toca el país al este de Chile.</i>	Touch the country to the east of Chile.

During the first class Peggy also showed slides she had taken on a trip to Chile many years before. This activity added to the background knowledge the students were collecting on Chile. Afterwards, she asked them a series of questions about the country, and they were able to reply with more in-depth information. Mari suggested Peggy write a *language-experience story* with the students on chart paper to help synthesize the information they were discussing in Spanish. A language-experience story is a description, usually written on large pieces of chart paper, of a shared experience students have had or know about. The teacher begins the "story" and asks questions or pauses frequently so that the students can add information or sentences about the experience. The teacher reads the sentences as they are finished, always starting from the beginning so that the students have many chances to listen to the story as well as read the words on the chart paper. The next class session, Peggy began the story. She

started writing about Chile, eliciting much of the information from the students. The students were engaged in the activity and eager to participate.

### Chile

Chile está en la América del Sur o Sudamérica.

Es estrecho y largo.

Los países al norte se llaman el Perú y Bolivia.

La Argentina está al este de Chile.

El Océano Pacífico está al oeste.

Las montañas son muy altas y se llaman los Andes.

### Language Experience Story

Peggy reflected in her journal:

Mari suggested that I do a 'language learning experience' and I liked that idea. ...I knew it was a technique that would help me consolidate what the students were learning...I like keeping the chart paper because it gives my slower students a reference....I can pull these charts out again.

## The First Letter Exchange

Soon, the first letters arrived from Chile on the Internet. When they were printed, Peggy and Mari began to read them and realized there was a minor glitch in the transcription. Many of the Chilean students had included accent marks, tildes (ñ), and upside-down question marks in their writing, but the program on the library computer at Pocantico Hills School was not set up to take them. So, when the computer read an accented letter, it changed it to a completely different letter. For example, the letter "ú" was changed to "z" so the word *música*, which appeared in many letters, was *mzsica*. The word *años* (years), was *agos*. This last example was easy for the students to figure out since it was used in the context of how old the students were, so the "g" must really be an "ñ." At least the mysterious letters were consistent and together the class was able to decipher the messages. The computer teacher collaborated with Peggy to resolve the problem of the incompatible character set on the computers.<sup>2</sup>

The letters from the Chilean students contained a wealth of Spanish language and interesting insights into the culture of students from Chile (see Figure 2). Mari was fascinated with the content, which contained



Date: Tue, 16 Apr 96 16:08:46  
 From: Eider =?iso-8859-1?Q?S=Elez? <Alumno7@dsalas.plasca.plaza.cl>  
 To: Chema <poco@transit.nyser.net>

Hola Chema.

Mi nombre es Eider Alvaro Saez Paredes, nací en Temuco, el día 21 de Febrero de 1984, soy bajo, de pelo castaño, de ojos verdes. Mi padre se llama Fidel Humberto Saez Gallardo, trabaja en una constructora, de chofer, es alto, moreno, su pelo es negro. Mi madre se llama Eliana Paredes Sanchez, es ama de casa, pelo negro y mide 1.58, tiene los ojos café claro, es morena, mi hermano se llama David Heliacer Saez Paredes, nacio el 28 de Diciembre de 1974, es alto. Lo que mas me gusta hacer es jugar al futbol, también escuchar música de la radio. La televisión me aburre.

Bueno amiga me despido deseando que lo pases bien.

Escribe pronto.

Tu amigo

Eider

Padre Las Casas, 09-04-96

Date: Tue, 16 Apr 96 16:08:46  
 From: Cesar Moncada =?iso-8859-1?Q?S=Elez? <Alumno7@dsalas.plasca.plaza.cl>  
 To: Cristina <poco@transit.nyser.net>  
 Padre Las Casas, 16 de Abril  
 Hola Cristina

Mi nombre es Cesar Moncada y estudio en la escuela Darso Salas, de Padre Las Casas. Estoy en 7: año basico, tengo 14 años. Soy un chico responsable en mis deberes cuando tengo que hacer algo en clase. A mi me gusta tocar la flauta dulce. Vivo en Galicia 2, tengo que viajar todos los días para asistir a clases, demoro casi una hora en llegar a la escuela. Tengo dos hermanas, soy el mayor, practice un deporte que te contaría mas adelante cuando tu me escribas. Mi padre se llama Miguel Moncada, es militar y mi madre se llama Rosa, es dueña de casa. Por ahora me despido esperando tu pronta respuesta.

Tu amigo

Cesar

Figure 2. First Letters from Chile (some punctuation added).

Date: Tue, 16 Apr 96 16:08:46  
From: Juan Pablo Gutierrez =?iso-8859-1?Q?S=Elez? lumno7@dsalas.plasca.plaza.cl  
To: Catalina <poco@transit.nyser.net>

Hola Catalina

Es un placer escribirte estas letras.

Soy Juan Pablo Gutierrez Gutierrez. Mis Padres son Cecilia Veneranda Gutierrez y Juan Carlos Gutierrez, por considencia mi madre es Gutierrez y mi padre también. Me gustaría conocerte, yo tengo 12 años, me gusta el fútbol, no juego por ningún equipo. Me gustan todas las verduras menos el morrón. Me gustaría que me respondieras esta carta para saber de tu país, ¿cómo es todo lo que hay aca? Bueno amiga por el momento te dejo, cuando me contestes conversamos otro poco.

Se despide tu amigo

Juan Pablo. Chaooooooooooooo

Figure 2 (cont'd.).

material for many Spanish lessons. When the first set of letters arrived, she examined them with the class. Using overhead transparencies of the actual letters, the students figured out the code for the punctuation. Then they focused on the messages, listing the many greetings and farewells used in the letters (*Hola, Buenos días, Buenas tardes* and *Adiós, Hasta luego, Chao, Chaooo, Tu amigo/a*). Often, sentences included interesting words such as *callejero* [a boy who likes to "hang out" in the street] and useful phrases the Chilean students used in their letters that could be repeated in the replies from the Pocantico students. Some of Peggy's students talked about their *aspecto físico* [appearance], one replied using the verb *cumplir* [to turn a certain age] to say when he would be 13 years old, and another borrowed the phrase, *Estoy muy alegre de escribirte* [I am very happy to write to you]. The Pocantico students also saw examples of concepts they already knew about from their Spanish lessons. They discovered that the Chileans *do* often use their mother's and their father's names, that numbers *do* go after street names, and that the day goes before the month. They explored the metric system as they calculated how tall a Chilean correspondent was. They learned new descriptive adjectives such as *risueña* [smiley] and *cachetona* [a person with chubby cheeks]. They were very interested in the fact that the Chilean students started school at 8:00 and finished at 1:00 or 1:30 (they also used the 24-hour clock) and

that they wore uniforms. And they saw evidence that the Chilean students were like themselves in many ways. They liked sports and music (*el Me-neito, Macarena*), they studied similar subjects (English begins in 5th grade and French in 7th) and the students live in many types of families.

For the next activity, Peggy asked her students to brainstorm information they could use in their replies to the students in Chile. They picked a topic such as school and listed all the relevant vocabulary (*dos pisos* [two floors], *un gimnasio* [a gymnasium], *una biblioteca* [a library], etc.) Later, as they wrote their letters, the students expanded this information into sentences. They were also encouraged to think of questions they wanted answered by their keypals such as, *¿Juegas deportes en la escuela?* [Do you play sports in school?], *¿Te gusta leer?* [Do you like to read?] *¿Cuál es tu música favorita?* [What is your favorite music?] *¿Es tu escuela pública?* [Is your school public?]. It was amazing to see the amount of Spanish they reviewed in an interesting context during this process, language that would help them complete a real task. The first responses (Figure 3) were e-mailed off to Chile, and the students anxiously awaited the replies.

¡Hola Alex!

Hola me llamo Rena. Yo vivo en Elmsford, NY. Mi familia es buena y ¿tu familia? Tengo un hermano Max 2 y una hermana Dana 8. Tengo trece años y vivo en un apartamento. Me gustan los deportes y mi deporte favorito es basquetbol. Me encanta español e inglés. No tengo un novio todavía. Tengo muchos amigos y amigas. Tengo ojos azules y pelo pardo. Soy delgada. ¿Cuánto tiempo andas con Luz? Envía me una foto a mi escuela de Luz y ti.

Adios Alex. Espero conocerte bien.

Querido Karis,

Hola! Me llamo Antonio. Cumpló trece años en junio el veinte y ocho. Tengo un papá Felipe, una mamá Maria, un hermano Felipe, y un hermana Christina.

Me encanta jugar los deportes. Mis deportes favoritos son fútbol y beisbol. Yo juego los deportes todo el tiempo. Vivo en una casa mediana en Briarcliff Manor, NY. Yo tengo el pelo rojo, y los ojos pardos. Yo soy alto. Mis pies son 29 cm.

Hasta Luego

Antonio

Figure 3. Samples of the first replies written by the Pocantico students.

## Culture Research: Products and Perspectives

When Peggy's students were not working on their letters she was continuing with the unit on Chile. After teaching a bit of the geography of Chile, Peggy divided the students into groups of four or five students. Each group was assigned a specific aspect of Chile to research and report back on to the whole class. The topics were: a detailed map of Chile; the Chilean flag and the meaning of its colors; a topographical map that highlighted the rivers, lakes, and mountains; and one that showed the major cities and depicted where Temuco (the largest city near where the Chilean students live) was located. Each group created a visual for their report and wrote a description on a large piece of chart paper (Figure 4) and then presented them to the class.



Las montañas en Chile se llaman los Andes.

Los ríos importantes son:  
 el Maule  
 el Maipo  
 el Itata  
 el Bío Bío

Los ríos van de las montañas al océano Pacífico.

En el sur hay muchos lagos.

Figure 4. Floorcloth map of Chile and written description.