

## Authors “in Residence” Make Writing Fun!

Online mentors help fourth graders compose original stories.

*By Chelsea Hagins,  
Jackie Austin, Raven Jones,  
and Taylor Timmons  
With Patti Weeg  
and Lois Szymanski*

**Subject:** Writing, English, language arts

**Audience:** Teachers, teacher educators

**Grade Level:** 4–5 (Ages 9–10)

**Technology:** Web/Internet, word processing, and e-mail software

**Standards:** *NETS•S 4; NETS•T II* (<http://www.iste.org/standards>).  
*ELA 1–3, 6* (<http://www.ncte.org/standards/standards.shtml>).

Chelsea pointed to four sentences on her computer screen. “Am I done, Mrs. Weeg?” Writing was not her favorite activity. She and five other fourth-grade classmates were in the early stages of writing a story in the global classroom.

For the past four years, 12 students at Delmar Elementary School have taken part in this online mentoring program, funded by Title V monies. Called “Authors in Residence,” the program matches students with authors Lois Szymanski and Sarah Weeks. The authors mentor the young scribes by e-mail for six months as they create original stories in the global classroom.

Chelsea, a typical fourth grader, explained her feelings about writing before she met Szymanski online. “I didn’t really like to write because my hands got tired. It’s hard to write a lot of sentences and think of ideas.”

Taylor didn’t like to write before the program either. “At first I didn’t like to write, but I got used to it and I started liking to write about different things. It was nice to decide my own topic. I really liked that!”

### **Starting a New Program: Curiosity and Excitement Build**

When asked how they felt about the new writing program with an online mentor, the students said this:

*Chelsea:* When Mrs. Weeg said we were going to write a story on the computer with Mrs. Szymanski’s help it sounded kind of cool. I thought it was neat to use e-mail. I had never sent

e-mail to a real author before. I felt special because we were the only ones doing this in our school.

**Jackie:** I was excited when I heard about the project. I thought maybe we were going to write about our summer. At first I didn't know that we could write about anything we wanted. That was neat. I wrote about my friend. [Mrs. Szymanski] told me, "Whenever you write about something or someone you love, your writing comes from your heart. That is the best kind of writing!"

**Taylor:** I felt glad that I was going to be a part of this program. I didn't know at first how this would work using e-mail but I soon found out, and it was exciting.

**Raven:** I was happy because I never saw or worked with a real author before. E-mail was something new for me. I had never used it before. It sounded like we were going to have fun.

### Bonding with an Online Mentor

The students used graphic organizers in Kidspiration software to help them plan their stories. These "story webs," as well as their complete writing process, are posted on Web pages so that Mrs. Szymanski and the students can see them. (*Editor's note:* Find URLs under Resources on page 39.) As the students and their mentor communicated using e-mail and the Web, an important bonding took place.



PHOTO BY ANNA MATHIE

Patti Weeg's students write original stories with the help of children's author and online mentor Lois Szymanski.

Jackie said, "I knew that Mrs. Szymanski really cared about my writing and I didn't want to let her down. She wrote long letters to me and made comments about every part of my story."

Chelsea agreed that Mrs. Szymanski's letters made her feel that her story was very important. "I felt happy that she took the time to help us. She read our stories and gave us lots of good ideas. She was always happy to hear from us and looked forward to hearing from us again. I liked working with Mrs. Szymanski because it was like having a second writer. We were a team and I knew she was going to help me get my story written."

Taylor enjoyed the quick response and sincere letters she received from Mrs. Szymanski. "We sent Mrs. Szymanski our story drafts by e-mail and she wrote back to us as soon as she could. I felt like someone was actually listening to my story and taking the time to give me good ideas. I knew by the way she was expressing her words in my letters that she cared for me and my writing."

### Writing with a Partner

The students agreed that having someone on the other end of an e-mail who is there to help in the writing process makes all the difference for them. For some, writing was





PHOTO BY PATTI WEEG

Raven, Taylor, Chelsea, and Jackie (from left) agreed that having an online mentor made writing fun.

a task they dreaded because they had only a pencil, a blank piece of paper, and their own thoughts. “Authors in Residence” gave them a taste of online collaboration, making the process easier and more enjoyable.

According to Taylor, having an online mentor is definitely an asset. “My writing got better because Mrs. Szymanski helped me. She helped me decide who the narrator was in my story. She suggested ways to add details. I used to think that writing is hard but when you get used to it, it’s really easy. I rewrote my story about four times. I thought I would be done after the first time I wrote it but now I know it doesn’t work that way. Mrs. Szymanski suggested different ways for me to change my story to make it

better and I’ll admit that it was a little bit hard to do that. I know that she was helping me make the best story I could.”

Chelsea said, “Mrs. Szymanski helped me with my whole story. She didn’t have to help us but she did it anyway ... and from her heart. Most of all, she was very kind. She asked me to add details and to be sure to include the setting and tell about the characters. She always asked for details to make the story more interesting. Working with Mrs. Szymanski taught me that even though you might not like to write, you really can do it. You just have to write until you get it right. I thought we would write on paper once, you would check it and then we would

type it. It didn’t work out that way. We had to redo it many times. It was kind of hard to make changes but not all the time. I expected that I would have to do that. If I had to take the whole story apart, then I would have felt sad. Mrs. Szymanski’s help made all the difference.”

Jackie appreciated how the writing activities Mrs. Szymanski suggested helped her expand the story. Mrs. Szymanski wrote, “You could play the ‘What-if game’ and ask yourself some questions like: What if Dez looked at the lump of money in Jackie’s pocket, and questioned it? What if Dez demanded Jackie give her back her money? What if Dez started to cry? What if Jackie started to cry? What if Jackie’s brother came in with the money, and said, ‘Hey, I just found this on the sidewalk? Is it yours?’ I bet you can come up with some what-if questions of your own! When you answer the what-if questions you will have many ideas and maybe you can choose one or two to make the argument last a tiny bit longer.”

Raven acknowledged that a computer and a mentor make writing fun. “It’s more fun to type words on a screen. Mrs. Szymanski sent us ideas in her e-mails. She told us what to put in the story and what to take out. She was there to help when I got stuck. I liked that.”

### Meeting Mrs. Szymanski in Person

Each year, at the end of our author program, Mrs. Szymanski travels to Delmar Elementary to meet her young writers and give presentations to the student body. Seeing their online mentor in person is always a highlight for the students.

“It felt really good when I met her in person,” Chelsea said. “She came all the way to see us even though she was busy.”

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**to us at [letters@iste.org](mailto:letters@iste.org).**



Jackie agreed. "I felt that she came all this way just to see us. This made me feel special."

"It was cool to meet her in person," Taylor said. "I read the autographed book she gave me. It's nice to have a book that is signed by the author. She gave us good advice when she came to our school, like the ideas folder. You can write down any ideas you might have for a story and stick it in your folder. I made an ideas folder just like she said."

### Thinking about Writing Today

The girls expressed their thoughts about writing now that their program with Mrs. Szymanski is over and a new set of students will soon begin their stories.

"Writing is still hard but it's worth it to try your best," Jackie said.

Chelsea said, "I feel better about it now."

Taylor agreed by saying, "Now I think writing is a little bit fun."

"It comes easier now," Raven added.

### Using Technology in a Fun Way

Chelsea feels that computers help make learning fun. She said, "If I wanted to do a writing project with a student in another part of the world I know I could do it. I would think of all the things that Mrs. Szymanski taught me. I would use the computer and send e-mail just like we did with Mrs. Szymanski. This would be a neat way to learn. If we didn't have computers we wouldn't be here in your lab today, Mrs. Weeg. Computers give us lots of opportunities."

### Concluding Thoughts from Their Mentor: Lois Szymanski

"My experiences in the global classroom have helped me see how students look at writing. It is hard to

remember what it was like to be in elementary school, struggling with writing, but Jackie, Chelsea, Taylor, and Raven, and all my students in the global classroom, have helped me look at writing through their eyes. It has been a wonderful experience, one I hope goes on for many years. Watching the children's writing grow from week to week is exciting. It fires me up, inspires me, and makes me want to write more stories for children! You can bet that I think of my students when I am writing the next book."

### Concluding Reflections from the Computer Teacher: Patti Weeg

"Authors in Residence' brings our students a unique experience. They become active participants in their learning while working with a mentor who is an authentic role model. Instruction becomes personalized for each student as we sit together in the lab and respond to the ongoing support and encouragement that arrives in e-mail from their mentor, Lois Szymanski. These young authors will always remember Lois and the special time when their hard work made them proud."

### Resources

"Authors in Residence"—Lois Szymanski: <http://www.globalclassroom.org/authors/authors2002.html>

"Authors in Residence"—Sarah Weeks: [http://www.intercom.net/~bettyryall/AuthInRes\\_2004.html](http://www.intercom.net/~bettyryall/AuthInRes_2004.html)

Delmar's "Authors in Residence" program presented at a national conference in Florida, January 24–26, 2002: <http://www.globalclassroom.org/authors/florida/>



Chelsea Hagins, age 11, likes to play outside with her friends on her trampoline. Her favorite book is *Old Yeller*.



Jackie Austin, a fourth grader, enjoys sports, especially softball. Her favorite book is *Swiss Family Robinson*.



Raven Jones is 11 years old and likes to play "hide and go seek" with her friends. She has a dog named Slate.



Taylor Timmons, a fourth grader, likes to swim. Her favorite subject in school is math.



Lois Szymanski shares her work with children through school presentations and online. She has written 15 books for children, including 6 books in the *Gettysburg Ghost Gang*, a series she writes with co-author Shelley Sykes. Lois is the regional advisor for the MD/DE/WV sector of the Society of Book Writers and Illustrators.



Patti Weeg is a Title 1 computer teacher at Delmar Elementary School in Wicomico County, Maryland. She and her students have used technology since 1992 to communicate and collaborate with other teachers and students around the world in many global online projects.



Dr. Dennis Harper has spent the past 35 years helping students, teachers, and schools throughout the world infuse technology to improve student learning. As a former high school teacher, university professor, district technology director, ISTE board member, researcher, speaker, and presently the founding director of the Generation YES organization, Dr. Harper continues to contribute to a wide variety of educational technology agendas.

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