

Title of Project: Re-humanization Through Old-fashioned Writing
Country of project implementation: Vietnam, USA, Kenya, Armenia, Uganda, Colombia, Burkina Faso
Sponsoring College: Middlebury College
Designated Project Leader: Hieu Nguyen (Vietnam, Middlebury College, '23, Lester B. Pearson United World College of the Pacific, '19.
Associated project blog or website: peace-pen.org



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Projects for Peace
THE VISION OF KATHRYN W. DAVIS

Section 1: Project narrative

Peace Pen is an old-fashioned pen pal writing project that aims to foster friendship beyond borders and intercultural understanding among K-12 students. Using letter-writing as a tool, the project aims to allow students to hear diverse perspectives within the global Peace Pen community and think critically about stereotypes, climate change, and other pressing world issues. Central to our approach is a series of very fun and meaningful activities among pen pals that address specific needs and issues in each participating country. As a reminder, we envision Peace Pen to be a long-term project that will continue in many years. Therefore, the aim of the Project for Peace Fund this summer is to develop a scalable automatic system for the letter exchange processes and more partnerships with local schools across the globe.

The project idea came from an incident in a workshop about government expenditures that I co-led in the Global Expo event at Middlebury College in Fall 2019 for elementary children in Addison County. The workshop titled “money matters” allowed students to have a choice of which sectors they want to invest in with their limited “national budget”, ranging from healthcare, education, public services to military services and foreign defense. Contrary to our expectations, a lot of kids voiced their opinions to invest most of their money in National Defense with the rationale “to make nuclear bombs and exploit the third world countries’ resources”. Being the first generation of children growing up without war in Vietnam, this incident made me ponder many questions. I asked myself: how could these kids develop hatred at such a young age? Through personal experience and research, I learned that conflicts start because of the tendency of people to dehumanize others who identify with a group that has different beliefs other than themselves. I then asked myself, if the children knew someone personally from Vietnam, would they be able to see other people from underprivileged backgrounds less than themselves? Inspired by my experience at Pearson United World Colleges where I witnessed friendships born from students who come from opposing conflict regions such as Israel and Palestine, I decided to found Peace Pen as an effort to create intimate and personal connections among people in the world, so that they could see a foreign country or a group identity as good friends instead of less-than-human enemies.

Our vision for Peace Pen is to leverage the power of old-fashioned letter writing to create peace. We believe that this approach only works if the connection is long-term (i.e more than one school year). Not only do we focus on conflict or post-conflict regions, but we also expose students to other people whose backgrounds are different from their own. In the prototype sponsored by the Center for Community Engagement in the academic year 2020-2021, Peace Pen hosted students from diverse backgrounds: students with hard and hearing, students with intellectual disabilities, students who are ethnic minorities, students from different socioeconomic backgrounds, and students from rural and urban settings. Despite the global pandemic, we facilitated more than 300 physical letters for 106 students across the globe. In a survey sent out to teachers whose classrooms participated in Peace Pen, 100% wanted to continue in the next academic year. Some of the testimonials from the teachers include: “The ability to connect with kids in a far-away country, who appear to be so different and live such a different life, but to then realize how much they had in common

and to begin to empathize with cultural differences. We made many connections to current events and our IB units of inquiry. Motivation to write! It was very exciting.” and “Students loved sending and receiving communications from a different country, especially one in such a different region. They appreciated integrating information about Vietnam into our math, science, and social studies content.” Moreover, Peace Pen also inspired students to express who they are to the world. There was a student from Mary Hogan who had used the she/her pronoun when introducing to his Vietnamese friend but later decided to change his name and pronoun to he/him for the first time!

Now we know that our model works, how can we make a bigger impact? One of the main goals of the summer with PFP was to create a scalable system through two components: a complete website and an automatic system for communication between partner schools and Peace Pen. Through the prototype of the program, we realized that there is a need for a better communication system between Peace Pen and the teachers so that we would be able to acknowledge their needs as well as maintain the progress of the letters. In addition, we need a concrete system to keep track of all the letters that come in and out as we missed several letters from students last year. To address these challenges, I took the first step in creating an official G-mail account for Peace Pen, so that other volunteers and I can easily keep track of the incoming letters and emails that need to be followed up (peace-pen.midd@gmail.com). Next, I designed an official website for Peace Pen (<https://peace-pen.org>) using WordPress for outreach campaigns and future collaboration purposes. On the website, I included the most up-to-date information about our program as well as plans for our next academic years. Finally, I designed a chain of forms (Mail Chimp) that allow teachers/our program partners to sign up, confirm that they have sent/received the letters to us, feedback forms as well as automatic emails that will be sent to them once they complete the form. The chain of automation emails helps us to better engage with the teachers.

One of the other challenges we faced was the incredibly long time to send letters to the host countries (i.e Vietnam to the US). A lot of teachers told us that their students lost their excitement and almost forgot about the program because of the three-months+ waiting time. To solve this challenge, I developed a hybrid model of letter writing, where we facilitate one online letter exchange a month which allows students to discuss a proposed topic and one physical letter exchanges every three months which allows students to exchange physical products such as drawings, photos, gifts... This model of operation requires more extensive background work. As a result, I prepared a Drive cloud inventory with folders where teachers can upload the students' letters and detailed instructions for writing letters (including the Peace Pen screening process).

With the funds of PFP, we were able to strengthen our existing partnerships and extend this program to more communities in the world. During the summer, I worked with my former teacher at UWC Pearson College, Dr. Geoffrey Tindyebwa, the founder and executive director of KULE International foundation in Kenya and Uganda, to collaborate to develop a Peace Pen program in Kenya and Uganda. KULE aims to “promote international and cultural understanding through partnerships that address key global issues such as health, education, the environment, and poverty eradication.” I have decided to use PFP funds, \$2000, for KULE to buy three computers and three scanners in three schools in Kenya (Mukangu Primary school, Mukangu Secondary, Kiboi Secondary school). The computers allow the school to scan students' letters. Not only will the computers aid us in creating computer literacy programs for the children via Peace Pen, but they will also help to increase the overall literacy of the children in many years to come by allowing KULE to catalog their donated libraries. In addition to KULE, I mentor Elena-Alexandra Balan, a second-year Peace Pen CAS Leader at UWC Dilijan, to extend the Peace Pen CAS activity which she started at UWC Dilijan. This academic year, Elena's group will have letter exchanges from students who are from



Armenia, Colombia, and the USA. In addition, I connected Elena to the student leaders in the KULE CAS activity in Pearson College, who are doing similar projects with Peace Pen, for collaboration. It is worth noting that we encountered various challenges to continue the Peace Pen program in Vietnam. The country is experiencing a strict lock-down due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This results in complete discontinuation of the program in the country at least until the Spring semester of 2022. Moreover, some of our schools in Vietnam can no longer participate because of the change in classrooms and availability.

In addition to the original idea of the Peace Pen, the PfP fund allows us to extend Peace Pen to the field of medicine. This idea stems from the insight that children who have chronic diseases often feel lonely in the hospital while receiving care. We are working with Centre Hospitalier Universitaire Pédiatrique Charles de Gaulle in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso to facilitate letter-writing exchange among children in the hospital (who receive long-term care, i.e. more than 3 months) and medical students in Vietnam. This model of writing allows Vietnamese medical students to gain further insights into patients' personal feelings as well as provide emotional support for the children to combat diseases.

This program provides space for students to learn about themselves and the world as a whole. Peace Pen has been a place for students to stand up for their true gender, ask about the lives of friends that live in a different country and value different things from them, celebrate individual and cultural differences, and beyond all, the space to bond these incredible friendships that is an antidote for ignorance and hatred. Amid the pandemic, this project has never stopped surprising me with challenges. However, reading the positive stories of the children in Peace Pen reassures me of the value of the work I put into this project. Peace Pen is not a one-time project that leaves the community more long-term burden than good. I like to imagine Peace Pen as a persistent effort of change, which is like a spring of water falling off the rock: it could shape the future of the world through unseemingly small action, every single day.

Thank you for believing in our mission.



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Section 2. Photographs

