

What's in a Name?
An Intergenerational Exchange

Activity, Time and Materials

ACTIVITY:

This activity is designed to generate interaction between elementary school children and elders in care facilities. Students and elders will learn about nicknames and naming customs by reading material from the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers: Folklore and Folk Art of the Northern Great Plains*. The students will interview a classroom partner about his or her nickname and then conduct a written interview and exchange about nicknames with an elder partner as a pen pal.

TIME:

Two class periods (forty-five minutes each) for participating elementary school classes. Two to three sessions of forty-five minutes each at the elder care facility.

MATERIALS:

- Pens
- Paper
- The book *Sundogs and Sunflowers: Folklore and Folk Art of the Northern Great Plains*

“THREE PLAGUES” (LONELINESS, BOREDOM, HELPLESSNESS):

This activity is designed to increase social interaction between fourth grade students and seniors at elder care facilities through the sharing of letters about nicknames, which will directly address both loneliness and boredom. Helplessness will be addressed by having any elders who are unable to write their own letters share their information orally with someone else who can. More importantly, helplessness is addressed by placing the elders in a position of informal “teachers,” who will be helping their pen pals with a school activity. This highlights the fact that while there are some things the elders may no longer be able to do, they still have value to contribute to others. If necessary, someone also can read the letters from the elders’ student pen pals, as well as any follow-up postcards from the students thanking the seniors for their letters.

ASSOCIATED MEDICAL STUDY:

“The world population pyramid has changed shape. However, this does not mean that societies have changed their negative concept of old age. Our study proposes an intergenerational service-learning program with 179 university students and 101 slightly depressed elderly people. The results show that the elderly people who interacted improved in well-being. Those interacting with the young people tended to lower their stereotyped perception of themselves, while the others tended to augment it. The young people tended to moderate their stereotypes of the elderly with or without interaction.”

[Abstract]

--Hernandez, Carmen Requena, and Marta Zubiaur Gonzalez. “Effects of Intergenerational Interaction on Aging.” Educational Gerontology 34, no. 4 (2008): 292-305.

Activity Plan

PLANNING PRE-SESSION (2 HOURS OVER 2 SESSIONS):

1. The person directing this activity should first meet with a local elementary school (fourth grade) teacher to discuss and plan the pen pal letter exchange. Discuss with the teacher how the pen pal activity could be shaped to meet already existing curriculum requirements, like the study of home states (North Dakota Studies, South Dakota Studies, Minnesota Studies, etc.).

SESSION 1 (45 MINUTES):

(Introduction to names and nicknames.)

1. Read “A Little Background on Names and Nicknames” to the students and senior participants.

“A Little Background on Names and Nicknames”

Names and nicknames are important ways we identify ourselves personally and culturally. For instance, your family may call you “Sue,” even though your name is “Susan.” Your coach may call you “Speedy,” because you can run fast. You might choose a nickname that is easier to pronounce, if you spend time with someone from a different culture.

Many years ago, everyone in a small village would just

go by one name. As more and more people moved into larger communities, it became confusing because often there were just a few names used. Gradually, people began to have nicknames, so John might have been called “John the Red,” if he had red hair, or “John the Younger,” if he was younger than another “John” in the village. Gradually, these nicknames became last names (or surnames) and were often shortened or translated—so that “John the Younger” became “John Young.” In many cultures, there are four main sources of surnames: personal characteristics (like “Red”); place characteristics (*near the river or under the wood*); occupations (for example, *Baker* or *Miller* in English and *Herrera* [*blacksmith*] in Spanish); or a prefix or suffix that indicates “son” or “daughter.” For the English word “son,” for instance: in German (“sohn”), Mendelsohn, son of Mendel; in English (“son”), Johnson, son of John; in Norwegian (“sen” or “ssen”), Hansen, son of Hans; in Irish (“mac”), Macdonald, son of Donald, or “O” for grandson, as in O’Riley, grandson of Riley.

2. Select a student to read (or have them read aloud to the elders) each of the sections on “Nicknames” and “Hoe-Boys” (on pages 271 and 272, respectively) in the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers*.

3. Have the students write a short response to one of the sections from *Sundogs and Sunflowers*. Do they think the nickname was fair? Do they know a story about someone who was given a nickname? If yes, they should write it down. (For the seniors, have a short discussion about the stories in *Sundogs and Sunflowers*. Had they heard any of these stories before? Do they know of any similar stories?)

4. For the “Hoe-Boys” section, have they heard the term “hobo” before? Do they know of anyone who has traveled or moved to get a job? Have they heard the term “tramp” to indicate someone who travels from place to place? What do they think the term “Tie Tramp” means? (Neck tie? Railroad tie?) This should be a short discussion, and the discussion should focus on the change in the word “hoe-boy” to hobo.

5. Have the students or seniors write a letter to their pen pal about their own nickname or nicknames. The letters from the students should be in the form of at least two paragraphs; one paragraph about their nickname and one paragraph asking about their pen pal’s nickname. If they say they don’t have a nickname, ask what nickname they would like to be given, or what name they might use for an avatar in a computer game. (The person directing this activity may have to explain to the elders what an avatar is in relation to computer games.) The students might also write about what they learned about nicknames from reading *Sundogs and Sunflowers*. Letters should include an appropriate opening and closing, like “Dear” and “Sincerely yours.”

SESSION 2 (45 MINUTES):

1. Have the students read their pen pals’ letters aloud to the class. (Have the seniors also read their pen pals’ letters to the group, or have someone else read their letters for them.) Designate three to four students to take visual notes on the board or a large sheet of paper. (This can be a senior at the elder care facility or a volunteer.) Note the following: Are there any nicknames in common with their pen pals? Do any of the senior pen pals or students have the same nicknames? What is the most unusual nickname? What questions do they have for their pen pals about the nicknames?

2. Have the students write a postcard thank-you note to their elder pen pals. (If possible, use photo postcards from your community.) The postcards should include an opening and closing and mention at least one thing from their pen pals’ letters. Also have the seniors write a postcard to their student pen pals. If possible, use blank postcards and include a drawing or sketch from the senior.

OPTIONAL SUGGESTIONS:

Create a display of the postcards at the school and/or elder care facility. Take a digital photo of the display and send to the school or elder care facility.

AUTHOR • SUSAN ELEUTERIO:

Susan is a professional folklorist, educator, and consultant to non-profits. She lives in the Greater Chicago area. She has conducted fieldwork and research with cultural and ethnic groups and folk and traditional artists across the United States in order to develop public and educational programming, curriculum for use in school and after-school programs, and professional development for teachers and artists. Material in this activity plan is adapted from her lesson on names in *Show-Me Traditions: An Educator's Guide to Teaching Folk Arts and Folklife in Missouri Schools*, which was published in 2009 and co-written by Eleuterio along with Missouri Folk Arts Program staff and master artists. Susan holds an MA in American Folk Culture from the Cooperstown Graduate Program (SUNY/Oneonta) and a BA in English/Education from the University of Delaware. She is a faculty member in the Cultural Sustainability Program at Goucher College in Baltimore, Maryland, and works with the Neighborhood Writing Alliance in Chicago.