

VIDEO LETTERS

Teachers and students will learn how to produce video letters to share cultural traditions and make new friends with classrooms throughout the Pacific.

Invitation for learning

Teachers and students can produce informal video “letters” in which they introduce themselves to a partnering classroom elsewhere in the Pacific, sharing their classroom, school, and community. These letters can contain songs, dances, humor, interviews, classroom activities, stories, and games. Children can be talking, describing, questioning, interviewing, laughing, singing, chatting – bringing their voices to the fore in whatever language they choose.

Video letters provide powerful possibilities for children to speak to genuine and valued audiences. This is especially important for children learning English as a second language, where motivation to communicate is critical. Children can decide what language to speak, visualize their audience, and plan activities to share.

Directions

Students and their teacher will produce a video letter to share with another group of students in the Pacific. The class will:

1. Create a map or storyboard of the activities, which may include self-introductions, interviews, demonstrations or presentations, and walking tours of the classroom, campus, or community. Include titles for the various scene changes.
2. Appoint one or several students to be the hosts of the letter. The hosts hold the microphone and bring continuity to the video production. They may also interview others or narrate activities as they are recorded.
3. Share in the handling of the video camera. Video letters are informal by definition; thus, camera handling can be somewhat sloppy.
4. Ensure that every student is somehow highlighted, acknowledged, and named in the video, so that students at the receiving end can recognize who’s who for future communications.
5. Shoot titles in real time by creating them on paper or chalkboard and filming them at each scene change.
6. Encourage every student to ask at least one question of the students at the receiving end.

7. Use camera-to-VCR editing to dub the video to VHS tape and mail it to the partnering classroom. The video may be sent as part of a cultural package, which could also include student art, photos, or gifts.
8. Encourage students at the receiving end to note the questions asked in the video letter and to prepare responses, either as an email exchange or as a return video letter.

Classroom applications

In video letters, students talk about themselves, their work, and their community. This can be difficult for some students, but if a light-hearted tone is maintained, video letters provide supportive contexts for communication and language expression. For ESL children, the letter may be particularly well received, especially if they are asked to communicate with a familiar audience such as their friends back home. If ESL students are given a chance to speak first in their home languages, they will choose to speak in English as they become more comfortable with the video letter process.

Stretching our imaginations: Dare to dream

Video letters provide children with opportunities to be themselves, to be spontaneous and informal. Video letters are not meant to teach. They are intended for students to make friends by sharing joy, fun, excitement, and beauty of place. Video letters can include songs and dances, gymnastics, food and games, and simple excursions about the school grounds and in the community. At Leatele School in American Samoa, for example, students put the camera in the back of a pickup truck and cruised through the village with kids smiling, narrating, and sharing breadfruit.