

Teaching Peace:

How One Teacher, 300 Students, and
One Very Big Idea Became the
Big Book: Pages for Peace Project



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As educators, we often struggle with the desire to reach students at a deeper level. We study, research, experiment, and create new methods for teaching a subject or an idea that is more tangible, more vivid, and more meaningful to the lives of our students. During these education journeys, we have successes and we have failures. Occasionally, we hit the nail right on the head. When this happens, our students come away from the lesson with new knowledge, with building blocks for an expanded learning experience, and with a strong sense of relationship that carries the subject of study to life's bigger arena. Add one very dynamic teacher, her dedicated students, and a committed adult volunteer group and an important lesson about peace blossoms into something much, much more than any one person could ever have imagined. For 5th-grade teacher Betsy Sawyer and her students, the result was the *Big Book: Pages for Peace Project*.

Teaching peace was not the original goal. In the fall of 2005, Betsy Sawyer, 5th-grade teacher at Groton-Dunstable Regional Middle School in Groton, Massachusetts, began an after-school "Bookmakers & Dreamers Club" to offer opportunities for children to develop writing skills while learning about the art of book making. During one weekly meeting while the seven original club members were brainstorming and researching themes for their book project, the children enthusiastically discussed the potential of breaking the record for largest book to be verified by *The Guinness Book of World Records*. They drafted a plan for a 10-foot by 12-foot book holding over 1,000 pages. Mrs. Sawyer then challenged the group to come up with a big topic for their "big book." The group adopted the topic of peace.

In 2013, Betsy Sawyer wrote, "When the original Bookmakers & Dreamers Club members asked me to support their dreams, I had no idea what this would entail. Together, we agreed to research the topic of 'peace' by writing to Nobel Laureates, leaders, relatives,

and . . . people from all walks of life to search for answers to the club members' five questions. Little did any of us realize where this adventure would lead us or how long it would take to find our way." At early club meetings, the members researched the varied aspects of peace and created a world conflict map; students studied and "pinned" areas of conflict. Club members learned about peace activists and Nobel Laureates. They began a letter writing campaign; hundreds of letters were sent to families and friends and also to community leaders, dignitaries, educators, veterans, artists, writers, musicians, politicians, and other students worldwide. The five questions posed by the students were:

- What is world peace?
- Will there ever be world peace?
- Where do you see the world in 20 years?
- What have you done to help create peace in your lifetime?
- What can KIDS do to help create a more peaceful world?

As the letters began pouring in, students took turns reading them out loud during club meetings and discussed the various perspectives and life experiences shared in the letters. Through the letters, artwork, poems, and song submissions, the club members began to realize that “world peace” is not just about an end to all wars. They discovered that in order to achieve world peace, people must be given the chance to live their lives with dignity and security. More specifically, the children began to understand that in order to end conflict and violence, all people need access to healthy food, adequate housing, education, health care, and meaningful jobs. They also explored the connection of many conflicts in the world to ethnic and religious intolerance.

Over the years, the “building blocks” from the original project idea began to shape a multi-curricular program that expanded the club activities to new levels, including:

Geography and Social Studies

- Mapping the addresses of incoming letters on a world map
- Studying current conflicts in the world and their history
- Graphing letters from veterans and the countries in which they served.

Math

- Determining book dimensions: weight, size, page thickness
- Studying angles to determine how best to view the Big Book
- Breaking down costs of book components and other related expenses.

English/Language Arts and Graphic Design

- Examining letter writing techniques and styles
- Designing the pages, book cover, table of contents
- Sorting letters into categories for future chapters.

Technology and Engineering

- Researching media materials for large-format printing and durability
- Designing ways to turn pages mechanically
- Studying large-format printing technology.

Marketing and Media

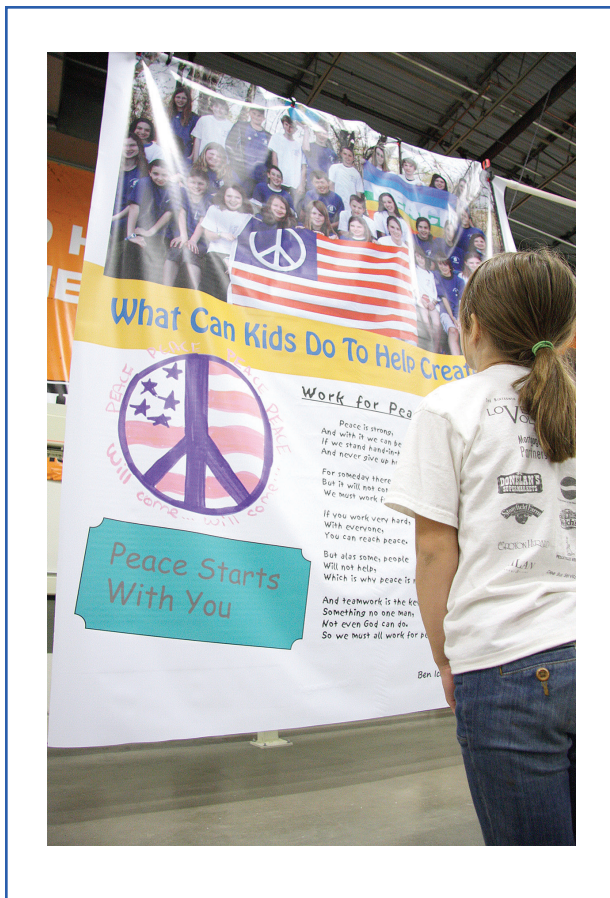
- Creating a publicity packet for Big Book promotion
- Speaking publicly at local organizations and in a video about the project
- Studying website options and design elements.

Global Citizenship and Stewardship

- Developing a sense of self in the global community
- Infusing foundational concepts into global citizenship curriculum
- Cultivating stewardship opportunities for middle school students.

The students presented their project to local community groups, including the Rotary Club, the Lions Club, and the Veterans Association. They invited guest speakers to club meetings, including members from the September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows organization, a Cambodian survivor of the Khmer Rouge, a local resident originally from Pakistan, and a Japanese woman who was directly impacted by the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. As each visitor shared their personal story, the club members gained a better understanding of the important connection between the thousands of letters arriving at their school and the real challenges facing humans around the globe.

Early on in the project, the Bookmakers & Dreamers Club began taking field trips to expand their learning experiences beyond the classroom and into the real world. During visits to UMass Lowell engineering college, an ink manufacturing company, and a large-format printing business, the children were able to ask questions and troubleshoot specific



Field trip to Unigraphics Printing Company.

challenges related to their giant project. They were exposed to many professions and had active conversations with engineers, printing press operators, company managers, and chief executive officers alike. On one field trip they were able to observe a worship service at a local mosque. They also traveled to the JFK Library in Boston, Massachusetts. They visited local peace museums and participated in peace education conferences. Three years into the project, the club members and their teacher were invited to the United Nations International Day of Peace Youth Conference, where they presented the Big Book: Pages for Peace Project to a large assembly of youth peace groups, as well as students from around

the world who were joining the event through live video conferencing. With the support of parent volunteers and school administrators, the trip to New York City became an annual event. On these trips, they developed many more important friendships, including with then United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon and Under Secretary-General Anwarul K. Chowdhury, and with activist John Feal and the Fealgood Foundation, an advocacy group for 9/11 first responders and their families.

Adult volunteer support has been critical to the great success of this long-term Big Book project. Since the first days of the club, parent and teacher volunteers have assisted with club activities, special guests, field trips, fundraising, page layout, book design, and a multitude of other tasks and details needing attention along the journey. Through one volunteer connection, the Bookmakers & Dreamers Club developed an invaluable partnership with award-winning book designer Joan Paley, who helped the project through its layout and design and educated the club members on what it takes to make a book from start to finish.

With the expanding breadth of this project, the need for more structure and organization led to the development of the Pages for Peace Foundation in 2008, a 501c3 not-for-profit organization with a board of directors and supporting committees to assist in accomplishing the expanding list of tasks and responsibilities involved in completing the physical Big Book, support the club enrichment activities, and help develop a clear vision of the project's future and its mission of spreading world peace. The foundation took over the task of completing the book and facilitating the club members' ultimate dream of taking *Big Book: Pages for Peace* on a world tour. This amazing giant book, weighing almost two tons and holding 1,076 Tyvek



Betsy at the UN with the *Big Book: Pages for Peace*.

pages in 10' by 12' format, is filled with over 3,500 submissions and the message of peace, hope, love, and humanity rippling through its pages deserves to be shared with the world.

Big Book: Pages for Peace was completed in the winter of 2016, the outcome of an 11-year project of enormous proportions in more ways than one. *Big Book* was placed on display at the United Nations in March 2016, just in time for its fearless leader, Betsy Sawyer, to celebrate her biggest dream with many of her students before losing a hard-fought battle with leukemia on April 3, 2016. Her students, the greater community, and the thousands of people who had been touched by this remarkable teacher learned another invaluable lesson from the peaceful parting of their beloved friend and mentor. With Betsy's death came a true rallying of energy to see this project through and to continue its valuable lessons through the peace club at Groton-Dunstable

Middle School. The Big Book Project's future now rests with plans to display the physical book and share its digital version via computer kiosks at new public locations. We are expanding website education and social media connections, and seeking a permanent home for this remarkable work of art.

Experiential education, which takes students into the community, helps students both to bridge classroom study and life in the world and to transform inert knowledge into knowledge-in-use. It rests on theories of experiential learning, a process whereby the learner interacts with the world and integrates new learning into old constructs.¹

In today's education age of high-stakes standardized testing, the opportunity for experiential education using creativity, connectivity, and critical thinking has taken a



Club members video-conference with Afghan students.

back seat to test preparation. Teachers long for time in the school day to engage their students with hands-on projects and collaborative, interactive activities. This unique after-school project started with pen, paper, postal stamps, and a teacher who engaged middle school students in real-world conversation while guiding them through to an age of maturity where they could comprehend global citizenship and diversity. So many aspects of this journey became complete educational experiences unto themselves; club members became pen pals with students in California and New Jersey, received letters and artwork from classrooms in Kosovo, and used video conferencing to share thoughts in real time with students from Afghanistan.

But the biggest story behind this giant hands-on project is the reality that something as simple as a low-cost letter-writing campaign requiring no fancy equipment and five easy

questions connected hundreds of students with people from all around the world. Even without the physical *Big Book*, the potential remains for powerful, active real-world learning that leads children to become engaged citizens in their local and global communities.

You have shaped who I am . . . through your teaching and commitment to the book. You have taught us how to listen and how to value and respect the opinions and experiences of others. You have taught us to be conscious of ourselves and the world around us with your compassion and patience. You have made us all better people and given us skills that we will need all of our lives no matter what we do. You have lead us with your example of overwhelming strength and determination.

—Jesse Trainor, former Groton-Dunstable peace club member



Club members with peace letters.

One teacher, seven original club members, and one very big idea started an education journey that surpassed all their wildest dreams and led these students, and hundreds more, to take action as global citizens and help change the world, one letter at a time. Along the way, they galvanized the greater community as they worked together to bring this amazing project to completion. The peacemaking continues; many of the original club members have gone on to pursue peace studies in college. Others have been empowered to carry their experiences into their future career goals.

I am using the peace and the passion you've instilled in me in my college major and future career. I believe it takes patience and compassion to be a nurse, and meeting you has helped strengthen those values in me.

—Flannery McAvoy, former Groton-Dunstable peace club member

Betsy Sawyer helped hundreds of students to believe in themselves as peacemakers and in peacemaking as a way of life. Her vision

of a peaceful world continues to serve as a guide, not only for the *Big Book* but also for the students' futures.

What seemed like the all-important goal of making the *Big Book* now seems as if it may be the least important piece of this odyssey. I have learned that we must respect humanity and work toward a more peaceful world together. For every 10 people who rejected our ideas, we found one who embraced or supported us. I have learned that it is important to give back and to “pay it forward.” The students wrote letters to people we did not know, asked questions that are not commonly or openly discussed, and waited to receive answers from busy adults. The process was exhausting and yet exhilarating. We felt rejection as well as pride, and loss as well as honor.

—Betsy Sawyer

Note:

¹ Eyler, J. (2009). The power of experiential education. *Liberal Education*, 95(4), 24-31. •