**The Breath of Life: Re-Storying Teens and Their Teachers in Summer School English Through the Two Lungs of Storytelling and Dialogue**

BY

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**ABSTRACT:**

Mandatory credit recovery programs can be onerous, subjective, and suffocating for learners and teachers alike. Adolescents and the adults who teach them share a primal need for reflecting on their self-narratives, creating new storylines, and animating their lives with these texts. The Life Writes Project created a series of rich encounters for learners to re-story their identities through narrative, reflection, and dialogue.

***SETTINGS AND STORIES***

*At risk*. It is a label we have all used to describe some students. If we are not careful, we can allow our presuppositions, based primarily on the labels we give children, to become the story of our classrooms. But what if we choose to interrupt this narrative? What happens when teachers deliberately disrupt our own stories about our students long enough to recognize the breath of life—a new framework for re-storying teens and their teachers through the two lungs of storytelling and dialogue? Both students and teachers grow exponentially.

Our summer school class, which primarily serves so-called “at-risk” eighth graders, is a credit recovery course in which students must pass in order to be promoted to high school. This is a critical moment in the academic progress of our students and we wanted to create an experience that allowed the students to use narrative writing and dialogue as the primary modes of learning. Doing so, however, came with several challenges. Newkirk (2014) rightly couches narrative as “the deep structure of all good sustained writing.” Our summer school class only runs for 20 days. Creating sustained writing time would be difficult but doable if we managed our time. Further, we know that every narrative has a narrator. Yet, Fletcher (1993) reflects that the narrator is “the one character writers most consistently fail to develop.”

From so many teachers who have gone before us (Peterson, 2001; Hillocks 2006; Goodson & Skillen, 2010) we know that narrative writing can inform and support students on a variety of personal and academic planes. For us and our work with students, narrative was the sum of all life experiences and attitudes. We hoped that by rethinking, or re-storying, how we designed and facilitated our summer school class, students would be encouraged to think critically about their own academic and personal trajectories.

To re-story one’s self means to reflect, reimagine, and respond to the incredible burden of a knowing narrative, one in which the narrator is, or becomes, aware of himself as an agent of information through time. Of course, this suggests agency and the capacity for action, congruent with the notions of control itemized by Ibrahim & Alkire (2007). In other words, an individual aware of himself as a narrator in his own life is more prepared to act deliberately on his behalf to alter the arc of his life story.

It’s no accident that our work, then, built on the premise of the power of story dovetailed with the anthem of Fecho (2011) that real dialogue sets both teachers and students in an equitable and sustained encounter with the texts of their lives through literacy. Our hope in re-approaching our work with students in this way was to provide a new platform for their writing while enhancing their capacities to rethink their academic and intrapersonal paths. Our students, whose most recent academic credentials included failure of one or more classes, needed to see themselves as persons with agency for transformative, albeit sometimes uncomfortable, storytelling. In this way, we wanted them to redefine themselves as people narrating their stories in ***multiple settings***, only one of which was summer school.

Our task was simple but not easy: facilitate the writing of new stories by students themselves and thereby re-story our own praxis. In essence, we were narrators enthralled with the work of helping our students see and value themselves as powerful narrators in their own lives. While the setting for our encounters pivoted around the physical middle school campus and ELL classroom to which we were assigned, the arc of our story swung wildly out into the surrounding communities and digital arenas by year two of the program that we ultimately called “The Life Writes Project.”

***THE TENACIOUS PURSUIT OF LIFE STORIES THROUGH THE TRIPTYCH NARRATIVES***

The first day of the first year of the Life Writes Project began in the auditorium of one of the public school district’s middle schools. A quick glance around the auditorium would reveal an unsurprising reality: most of these students were male, most came from underprivileged backgrounds, and most were young men of color.

A triptych approach to personal narratives invited these learners to reflect on stories from their lives through tragedy, triumph, and tribute. Graphic storytelling, close reading of mentor-texts, and multi-genre study became landmarks in the curricular design for this project. Much like a triptych tells a story in three panels, we asked our students to tell their life stories in three different pieces (i.e. a triumph, a tragedy, and tribute). One piece of the three had to be written in the form of a personal essay; the other two pieces could take any form the student desired.

Creating the Triptych Narratives was a matter of codifying this narrative pattern into a coherent curriculum of narrative inquiry for learners. The mentor-texts for examination and analysis in this coding process appeared everywhere, published authors and their works, peer teenage writers found online and in Scholastics *Best Teen Writing,* and others who shared compelling life stories in different modes, including video and digital stories.

Instead of defining each narrative ourselves, we dialogued with students about tragedy, triumph, and tribute. These conversations were integral in establishing the necessary trust in our classroom of writers. It can be a strange see-saw in the writing classroom between roles a teacher plays. But while we acted as authority figures, mentors, and advanced peers, the most important role we enacted was that of teacher as writer in the classroom. Doing so allowed us to be fellow travelers as writers engaged in process as journey on a number of levels. The way we involved our students as decision-makers at every point in the process was a radical shift from what many of these young people were used to.

By teaching students as fellow writers and narrators, our collective reason for being and mission was not merely passing summer school English or earning credit to pass into ninth grade English. Our shared vision became the tenacious pursuit of our life stories.

***DIALOGUE IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM***

Enhancing the writing process with dialogue is not a new approach (Hooks, 1994; Willhelm, 2010). In our summer school classes, dialogue certainly helped inform us on how to better address the individual needs of our students in a timely manner. The difficulty was in facilitating a richer, deeper dialogue about the work that maintained the integrity of students as decision-makers about their own writing. The art of conversation became the art of *listening* and asking questions that yielded unscripted responses.

To us, establishing a culture of dialogue in a very short amount of time was perhaps more difficult than we first thought. Our students were not used to being the *talkative ones* in a classroom setting. Most were more likely to sit and listen or “zone-out” from the conversation all together. With consistent nudging and invitation, students began to participate actively in our community. However, they needed several encounters with positive reinforcement before they would actively seek their own opportunities to contribute.

Dialogue is more than a teaching strategy; it’s an epistemology. Teachers who enfranchise students with dialogue throughout the writing process contribute to lasting changes in what students expect of themselves and their classroom learning culture. In this way, dialogue became the primary vehicle for our students to begin the writing process, and it served as an ongoing platform for growth and progress. Students shared their experiences with one another, sought support when the tasks of summer school became overwhelming, and troubleshot technological challenges. These opportunities for dialogue also prepared our students for a much more daunting task—the presentation of their work in a public exhibition that was held at the end of our summer school experience.

In our view, this is what the two lungs of storytelling and dialogue can best prepare young people to do—to speak and engage their audience with confidence. The summer school experience had pulled the students into active members of a classroom environment. The triptych narrative project gave each student the opportunity to re-story his or her life in a meaningful and creative way. And the exhibition provided students a platform to revise the community’s perception of them and their worth. In all three cases, narrative and dialogue helped facilitate a new conversation about the youth in our neighborhood.

***EMERGING THEMES***

In a short survey administered at the end of the first year, fifteen of the twenty students surveyed stated that it was *important* or *very important* to not only reflect on his or her personal experiences but to also make sense of these experiences. Then students were asked two very simple open-ended questions to examine their fears and hopes for the future. Beyond the typical social concerns, there were some powerful responses that indicated students were engaged in personal reflection and growth. Here are some examples of these responses:

“[My greatest hope is] keeping my grades up so I do not have to attend summer school ever again, even though I had a great time [this summer].”

“I hope I pass so that I can go to college and get a good job.”

“I hope to be able do well and better than I have my last few years in middle school.”

In so many ways, we saw this first year as a successful venture as many students had begun to write a new script for their personal and academic lives—from failures to accomplishments.

***MANY MORE WAYS TO GET IT RIGHT THAN WRONG: YEAR TWO***

Building on the success of our first summer school experience, we recognized that there were greater opportunities for our students to find richer experiences. With the help of a wide variety of community partnerships, we found numerous ways for our students to breakout from the classroom to see how literacy can enrich one’s life.

As we redesigned the Life Writes Project for the second year, we realized that we needed to adopt a different approach to student goals. We needed to remind ourselves that there were many more ways to get this right than to get it wrong. A large shift in the second year of the Project involved streamlining the team of volunteers and the curricular goals. The arc of experiences was similar to that of the first year, taking students from visual storytelling to creating the tragedy, triumph, and tribute stories of their lives.

With the continued support of the district’s school board and administration, we launched three new initiatives in year two of the Life Writes Project to serve as extensions to what had rapidly become a successful summer school class. In partnership with Freedom Writer teachers Bill Feaver and Scott Bailey, we created Write Reach. This facilitated the exchange of work between our students and children behind bars through [www.writereach.org](http://www.writereach.org), an ongoing blog created for graduates of the Life Writes classes. Open Skies is a voluntary program that allowed us to facilitate a dialogue of service and engagement by becoming involved in trail-work at a nearby public park. And, Books Abound positioned our students in dual roles as mentors and mentees to residents of a nearby retirement community.

Some of the most rewarding areas of growth for us and for our students in year two included the publication of students’ Triptych Narratives in an anthology of intergenerational writing with participants from the Books Abound program. Many of these works were translated into Spanish, with the knowledge that we would spread these stories to communities in Colombia, South America and beyond. Additionally, the second annual Life Writes Exhibition yielded more than 300 attendees, and celebrated the rites of passage earned by 40 student participants.

***ELLIPSES, NOT ENDINGS***

Ultimately, the Life Writes Project created purposeful and rich encounters for learners to become more literate with the texts of their lives.

What the Life Writes Project has shown is that we cannot reduce our students into quantifiable measures. But we can help them succeed. The re-storying of the lives of marginalized adolescents remains a work fundamentally their own, a work undertaken for the sake of understanding one’s life. Many educators are taking their lead from pioneers in literacy like Hillocks (2006), Fecho (2007), and Newkirk (2014). There is a growing recognition that making sense of one’s autobiographical stories is the most relevant, ongoing task for many young people today, even if they still don’t fully understand the tectonic implications this necessarily has for every significant conversation about education.

The Life Writes Project was about helping some of the most marginalized adolescents in our schools re-story their identities through the learning and re-telling of their life stories. We are honored to spread their stories forward beyond summer school and Pennsylvania and out into the world.

As many of our students realized, the difference between tragedy and triumph is often slim. So much depends on where the writer chooses to leave the story. Our stories as teachers are often judged by a similar margin. We believe we have grown a great deal through our revised view of our students and who they can become. Through the Life Writes Project it is us, the teachers, who have come to know the true meaning of *becoming re-storied*. From our students’ stories of love, life, death, and rebirth we see a landscape of new possibilities in our teaching practices that were not apparent in years past. We leave the first two years of the Life Writes Project with the wisdom we discovered in dialoguing with students: that in writing our life stories, there are ellipses, not endings.

CITATIONS

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