

“I Never Knew You Went Through That!”

A High School Writing Residency Success Story

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Writing and telling Personal Narratives is a powerful way for students to identify and communicate the turning points in their lives. As a Storyteller, I offer a Personal Narrative Writing Workshop, and after years of conducting this workshop, time and time again, I have witnessed the healing power and compassion-building benefits gained when students share their personal stories with their peers.

The Project

Personal Narrative Writing in one of the Language Arts benchmarks at Stevensville High School in Western Michigan and so, they wanted a Professional Storyteller to conduct a Writing Residency for ninth through twelfth graders, focused on writing and telling Personal Stories.

The involvement began with a teacher meeting, months before the Residency was scheduled. I met with the Language Arts Department to discuss their language curriculum benchmarks, objectives for the Residency, scheduling, and desired outcomes. I left them with some pre-visit materials to share with students in preparation for my visit.

The Language Arts Department decided that they wanted each grade level to attend a Storytelling Performance of Personal Tales. They also wanted me to conduct a two-hour writing workshop for each grade level. The first thirty students to sign up would attend with the expectation that the story they produced during our Writing Workshop would replace another Language grade for that semester. I built Writing Feedback sessions into the schedule, and a final performance that would be open to all Writing Workshop participants to listen or share their story in a Coffee House, Open Microphone format.

The success of this involvement was, in part, due to the fact that the students who attended the Writing Workshops chose to be involved. They came ready to listen and to write. But most of the success can be attributed to the power of Story Writing and Story Telling to transform lives.

The Process

When I conduct Turning Points workshops, I introduce students to a theory on finding the personal stories in their lives. The visual I use is a double-Venn Diagram (four overlapping

circles). One of the circles focuses on the “turning points” or life-changing events in their lives. One circle represents the people involved in that turning point. One represents the place or setting where the turning point occurred, and the last circle is for any object or symbol that is related to, or represents the life-changing event. I also explain to students that everything that has happened, “the story”, before they were born, contributed to the stories inside the double Venn Diagram, and that their future choices, or “story”, may be dependent upon one of the identified turning points. Their goal is to find the “overlap” in all of these story elements by mapping them on the diagram, and discovering the most impacting personal stories.

Before students begin working with the model, I lead them through a series of story building activities that allows them to introduce themselves in new ways, break the ice, and slowly guide them to their personal stories. I share with them my belief that you must know yourself well to identify the stories that have impacted your life. I also explain that the “lesson” they learn through “life-changing” experiences is the bridge in the story that will allow a reader or listener to identify with or be impacted by the story. And so, students participate in activities that promote self-awareness of who they presently are, and what is important in their lives right now. I have them create a “personal inventory” to identify who they are, in relationship to others in their life, what they like to do, and what they identify as personal qualities or traits. Usually the “personal inventories” contain the very items that will end up on their Storytelling Venn Diagram model. When they finally start working with the model, the “life-changing” stories and the details begin to appear, the excitement builds, and the writing begins.

At Stevensville High School, I watched students grab a hold of this model and create powerful personal stories. Some of the stories were painful, some were joyful, some were self-actualizing, and others contained clarity about the path they had taken so far, the reasons why, and the people who had influenced them along the way. Students asked to stay after the Workshop so that they could continue to write. Students came back at lunch to read their stories to me and receive more guidance. And when they shared their rough drafts, it was apparent that a safe environment had been established to allow students to reveal things about their lives that their peers had never heard. Sometimes the truth, clothed in a story is much easier to tell and to hear, and their stories were just begging to be told and heard.

On Thursday, the Workshop students gathered in groups of eight to ten to give each other feedback on their stories. I introduced them to techniques for giving productive and helpful feedback by asking leading questions of the author to help them refine their work. I could see the seriousness with which they approached their stories, and the interest they took in each other’s work.

On Friday morning, all Writing Workshop participants were invited to an Open Microphone Storytelling Coffeehouse. If they wanted to read or tell their story, they needed to sign up first thing in the morning. I dimmed the lighting in the room, set up a microphone and a spotlight. So many students came to sign-up that we ran out of space on the list.

That morning we listened to each story. Some students read them, and some told them. You could have heard a pin drop in that room. There was laughter, tears, hugs and attentive listening. I heard one student say to another, "I've known you my whole life, and I never knew you went through that!"

So many other students wanted to share their Personal Stories after that day, that the Language Arts Department started to have a monthly Storytelling Coffeehouse. They brought in a motivational speaker to address some of the issues that arose in the stories, and the students wrote, produced and performed a play based on some of the themes that emerged from those personal narratives.

During this Writing Residency at Stevensville High School I was reminded that Story Writing and Story Telling can transform lives.