3-7-2016

Word-Slam Stories as Venues for Stimulating Learning and Developing Agency with Urban High School Students

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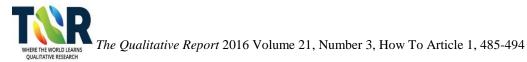
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Abstract

Word-slam was used with our high school urban students as instrument and method to elicit engagement with learning and develop agency through personal storytelling. The word-slam text (as it appears on YouTube and in hard-copy format as well) was chosen due to its being a personal story and an alternative, artistic and critical form of text that our students could relate to directly as the format and content were relevant to their lives and experiences. By using the text as a mentor text and studying the author's craft together, students were able to write, rewrite and develop their own word-slam stories, carving out a space for themselves to be seen and heard.

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Word-slam was used with our high school urban students as instrument and method to elicit engagement with learning and develop agency through personal storytelling. The word-slam text (as it appears on YouTube and in hard-copy format as well) was chosen due to its being a personal story and an alternative, artistic and critical form of text that our students could relate to directly as the format and content were relevant to their lives and experiences. By using the text as a mentor text and studying the author's craft together, students were able to write, rewrite and develop their own word-slam stories, carving out a space for themselves to be seen and heard. Keywords: Word-Slam, Urban Youth, High School, Engaged Learning, Personal Stories, Agency

> ***Tell your story as if you are supposed to be there***
> ***As if you have all the power.***
> Amy Cuddy

Our research project focused on improving learning for 9th graders in an inner city high school where we chose to work with personal story writing as a foundation for teaching English Language Arts (Pinhasi-Vittorio & Ben-Yosef, 2014). We were assigned 2 classrooms of students with a history of failure and slim prospects of success. Although each a unique human being, these African American and Hispanic children could jointly be characterized as socially and economically disenfranchised youth. Many had arrived from junior high school with few credits while others were locked into the classroom for the duration of the school day due to behavior issues. They were expected to learn - new computers were expected any day for use during free time to catch up on credits (which are the points a student is expected to collect for work completed by the end of school)…, but, computers never materialized and being locked in a room "like animals" (a student's comment) was, of course, counter-productive to academic learning.

Why Stories?

Looking for fresh ways of incorporating more nonfiction into their English classrooms, Kirby and Kirby (2010) found personal narratives (which they call contemporary memoirs) to be "ideal" for using with teens "to improve their abilities in sophisticated reading, writing, critical thinking, and inquiry strategies" because teachers can guide the writing to become sites of "honest unfolding of human struggles and triumphs from which important lessons are learned, significant family events are preserved, and generations of family members braid the cord of their lived experiences" (p. 22). This resonated with our belief that learning emanates from the learner and is closely associated with personal lives, cultures, passions, histories. We chose to use personal stories in our ELA classrooms to raise initial student engagement with reading and writing due to the intimacy of the material. These would then become a jumping board to increased interest in school learning in general. A bigger goal down the road was for students to begin seeing themselves as agents of personal and social change (Freire, 1997; Greene, 2001; Welsh, 2014).

The storytelling activities were intended to humanize the learning environments we shared by inviting in students' experiences and knowledge upon which to build new knowledge (Andrews, 2010; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969); to highlight students' instrumentality in their own educational process and help them make sense of the world while affirming our universal yearning for agency (Hirth, 2002). The personal story of which the student is expert and master was to be both platform and scaffold for furthering students' academic learning.

Personal stories also "…reveal truths and mysteries of lives we would never know if the author had not chosen to take us there" (Kirby & Kirby, 2010, p. 24) providing teachers with a deeper understanding of the children's abilities, knowledge base and needs, the networks of relationships enmeshing their life. Listening to both the stories and the silences showed us more holistic pictures of the children. One day, Jacob[1] reappeared in school wearing yellow and blue necklaces. When asked about them he didn't respond. Later someone explained that Jacob had joined a gang and those were its colors - an eye-opening story for realizing other ways of being and the complexity of situations as we worked to reach and teach every student.

Theoretical Framework

A complexity perspective on human behavior

Human behavior is a complex system characterized by multiple components in interaction. In such a system, the focus is on relations and interdependencies between the elements (e.g., teacher-students-environment-time-place) and not on elements on their own ("a student", "classroom size"), since no isolated element can explain the behavior of the system as a whole. In the emergent realm of complexity thinking "…one must simultaneously examine the phenomenon in its own right" (e.g., a child's behavior in school), "…and pay attention to the conditions of its emergence (e.g., the agents that come together, the contexts of their co-activity, etc.)." (Davis & Sumara, 2008, p. 34).

Within our educational system however, the culture/tradition/custom is to take the route of forming opinions based on the ways others have operated in the past regarding prejudicial treatment of students for two main reasons: (a) this behavior upholds the decision-makers' position in the social hierarchy, and (b) it is easier than the hard work necessary for dispelling the "dis"ability myths (Jackson, 1999). Yet if we approach the learners from a systemic perspective, we cannot perfunctorily label a failing student "lazy" or "unable" but are compelled to look at the interdependencies between the multiple elements that collude in generating this "failure," such as questioning what is meant by "failure" and who has the power to decide the meaning of "failure/success" in a particular context? A deeper and more personal perspective can reveal whether the child is hungry or sleep deprived; Is her mind focused on important distracting issues such as peer acceptance, bullying, or being asked out on her first date? Or, perhaps, looking at the physical body - does the child see well enough to be able to "succeed" in school? Does she have access to necessary glasses or other intervention? (Wasty et al., 2013)

A psychological perspective can further reveal whether there are issues limiting the learner's attention bandwidth to the point of being unable to attend to learning in school at a certain time (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013). Is her mind in survival mode, restricting the intake of any new information irrelevant to immediate survival (Zull, 2002)? Furthermore, children growing up with scarcity in areas of health care, emotional support or solid child rearing practices and those who have experienced trauma, face barriers to integrating into mainstream society and rarely reach the starting lines at times and places that "normative" children do,

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[1] All student names in this document are pseudonyms.

often due to toxic stress which is pervasive in families faced with ongoing challenges, feeding a cycle of intergenerational transmission of disparities in educational achievement (Matsuba et al., 2012; Shonkoff & Garner, 2012). Harder, more complex work, indeed.

Who will tell my story? Storytelling and agency

Why did we want to begin with personal storytelling with our "failing" students? Because stories are us. "Our natural tendency in real life seems to be to tell a story; the story of what we did" (Gerard, 2004. p. 4). Stories of and about people position them in the world and provide a foundation and perch from which to peer into the surroundings and make meaning of events as they relate to individual lives. Without a strong sense of identity, the outside world is intimidating, our interactions with it hesitant or unpredictable (think of first coming to a totally new place or of youth in the process of figuring out their identity). We tell our stories to realize our voice, our place in the world, our understanding of being alive.

Youngsters and people from oppressed and disenfranchised groups are usually unaware that their voices and their stories have a right to be part of the grand social narrative from which they are mostly hidden/ deleted/ ignored. We wanted our students to learn that they have the right to tell their own story to the world in any way they wish to do so and to establish this story as a valid foundation and place to grow their agency from. This process could permit "people who have been damaged by oppression to see themselves and to be recognized by others as morally trustworthy people" (Nelson, 2001, p. 34).

The idea that we all have the power and the right to raise our voices and tell our stories has informed our prior work with adult learners (Ben-Yosef, 2009; Ben-Yosef & Pinhasi-Vittorio, 2008-2009; Pinhasi-Vittorio & Martinson, 2008). We found that by standing up and telling our stories of struggles, challenges, strengths, dreams - we pronounce to the world: *Count me in! My life matters. I can be a viable member of the group*! So in this school situation we believed that if our students could tell their stories and we would be there to listen respectfully and acknowledge learning from them, they could be willing to learn from us about reading and writing related to other texts and genres. The process would begin with their own stories which they would then connect and relate to stories of others and ultimately move on to generalized critical inquiry with the understanding that "the story of an individual life … depends for its very intelligibility, on the stories of collective identity that constitute a culture (Andrews, 2010, p. 29).

"[I]ntroducing students to difference and alternity with an air of inquiry" (VanDeWeghe, 2011, p. 32), talking *with* others and closely listening to each other's experiences, allows for the creation and recreation of identities in a more inclusive climate. Rather than continuing to stand on the margins of society and have others tell and describe us - usually in less than admirable ways - our aim was to point out to our students their right to raise their voices and tell their own stories in the best way they want to, as they question their own lives and the world around them, building agency from within which learning springs and flourishes (Greene, 2001).

Using stories in the classroom to jump-start learning is not a fail-safe methodology: what if the teller refuses to tell their story? If the story offends the sensibilities of the listener? Laidlaw and Wong argue against using personal story writing in elementary English classrooms because of challenges this might pose for students who do not wish to share details of their lives, or for teachers who might become biased toward students after hearing their stories. When we asked our students to talk about their lives, the initial response was silence, except for Jacob who said, "You want me to tell you about my life, Miss? You want to hear my story? Hell, no!" Why would they want to share with us?

Many of our students lived vulnerable lives and were reluctant to write about them, whether from pain or shame. We needed to find venues for them to feel safe about opening up in their writing while conveying that our common humanity also means that we all go through similar experiences. So our approach included floating our own vulnerabilities, sharing our own struggles and triumphs with the students and leading them to develop narratives that raise the pain but focus more on resiliency and strengths. In one of the classes Michelle came to the front to read her story about losing her grandmother who had been the central figure in her life. Halfway through she began crying and Jannea, who had recently lost her mother but who up to that moment had never wanted to be associated with Michelle, came to the front of the class and embraced Michelle, whispering soothing words to her … What seems to have transpired was that once vulnerabilities were allowed into our shared space and the overall reaction was empathy and respect, or at the very least silence, we had established a venue for courageous expression. This emotionally and academically integrated approach allowed students to realize and create positive images of themselves, free from oppressive labels and stories of others that ordinarily prevent them from moving toward developing their voices and possibilities (Garfield & Brockman, 2000; Matsuba et al., 2012).

Multiple literacies and modalities

The concept of "multiple literacies" (The New London Group, 1996) acknowledges and values languages, grammars and literacies found outside formal school settings. This perspective recognizes the contextual value of diverse knowledge encompassing different ways of meaning making and providing every person with agency - the power to choose among various semiotic systems to make and remake ourselves and the meanings in our lives. Picasso expressed his ideas in art, Martin Luther King spoke out and marched for freedom, Marie Curie researched radioactivity in her lab....

Consequently, our classroom practice incorporated multiple modalities and semiotic systems of expression while integrating unconventional forms of texts in recognition of the multiple ways learners can and do make meanings of the world (Kress, 2010). When learners are allowed the freedom to construct relevant knowledge through any of their strengths and intelligences, the possibilities and investment to succeed expand, especially for learners on the margins of classrooms.

Teaching writing

We first worked on creating a safe space where *all* stories could be heard and valued and where *we all* tried to find openness to and empathy for the stories of others (Ben-Yosef & Pinhasi-Vittorio, 2012; Pinhasi-Vittorio & Ben-Yosef, 2014). In this inclusive climate we proceeded to the writing activities by employing a mentor text of which inquiry into the author's craft eased the way for our reluctant writers (Fletcher, 2011; Skinner, 2007). Students were guided on a deep-noticing journey where they were positioned "to read like a writer", exploring processes employed by the mentor-author to convey information and ideas. Together we examined language use, structure and style, word/symbol choice, repetition, elusive writing, etc. The focus was on the "how" (the text was written) rather than the "what" (the text is "about").

On the curricular level, writing personal stories required our students to examine and reflect on key elements of exposition, teaching them "…to explore, remember, reflect, reveal, analyze, organize, prioritize, and understand" the texts at hand (Kirby & Kirby, 2010, p. 25). On a process level we noticed that when writers become agents and authors of their own stories there was a stronger incentive for drafting, re-writing and sharing.

The Process

Mutual storytelling[2]

One day we showed a video clip *Family Portrait* by Pink as an alternative text where on a background of Pink's emotionally charged singing the lyrics of the song describe the agony of a teenager living in the throes of her family's break-up. When the presentation was over, the room was silent. When feedback was requested, silence lingered. Instinctively we decided to share *our* personal stories of family struggles.

Consequently, Gerri began speaking. Usually absent minded and inattentive, she told about the debilitating fear that her family would break apart, about her constant worries that her father would leave them and they would lose their apartment. Alejandra spoke of a father who ignores her and refuses to acknowledge her existence, let alone her worth as a human being. The constant pain and humiliation had driven her to cutting herself. Laquan told that his father ignores him because he loves only the children from his other wife… This exchange of stories in a climate of mutual attention and respect, initiated the unfolding of a safe-space in that particular classroom where both writing and participation began to flourish.

Situating the curriculum

We chose to work with word-slam, the art of writing and presenting personal stories in poetry form in front of an audience, to connect with students' preferences and experiences. Word-slam usually broaches personal and social issues, decrying injustice, social and cultural exclusion, describing personal struggles, etc. It is infused with rhythm and uses standard and vernacular language to deliver ideas with an undertone of urgency. Beaty's poem "Knock, Knock" became the text for bridging our curricular needs for critical reading/writing with the students' lives and interests.

Stepping stones

We began by viewing the clip with little introduction, allowing for immediate emotional responses based on sight, sound, rhythm and a general understanding of the story. We reviewed the performance several times, each viewing followed by short discussions of any responses that arose. The poem was then broken into its building blocks to create a matrix for the writers to fit their own stories into:

- Section I addressed *a memory of good times in the past* since in his exposition Beaty describes loving interactions with his father when he was young: *"…I would jump into my papa's arms and my papa would tell me that he loved me…"* When initial writing turned out flat we reverted to "detective mode" examining the way Beaty was able to convey emotional aspects of his story. Together we decided that the detailed sensual description allowed readers to generate a vivid image of Beaty's memory, so students returned to their stories to add details using their 5 senses. Alisha rewrote:

    "I remember when I was little my dad used to take me and my mom out to the beach. He used to buy my mom and I expensive food to eat. We would all lay in the hot clean sand with a rainbow umbrella over us…."

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[2] From our research, Pinhasi-Vittorio & Ben-Yosef, 2014.

- Section II dealt with the *change* as when Beaty's wonderful memory turned sour: "*…until that day when the knock never came…*" Shay demonstrated the switch when his game was stolen and his fun interrupted:

> *"Played outside with my friend*
> *Suddenly around the bend*
> *A guy walks up snatches my game*
> *I said that['s] lame.*
> *What!*
> *Why me!*
> *Oh Noo!"*

- Section III involved integrating rhythm into the piece. We talked about emotive effects of word repetition and tempo as students noticed that Beaty's rhythm accentuated the urgency of his story and especially the final message of encouragement to action. Quan was able to create a grabbing rhythm and build momentum for a striking effect in his story. His capitalized words create a palpable sense of frenzy abruptly cutting into an antithetical silence.

> *We were all partying, having fun,*
> *and it went like this*
> *BANG BANG said the police*
> *SHH SHH everybody said*
> *BANG BANG once again everyone is quite*
> *BANG BANG open the door*
> *BANG BANG you have two minutes*
> *BANG BANG yes said the house owner*
> *Then the police said it's too loud we got a compliant*
> *She said: sorry it's a party what do you expect*
> *SLAM goes the door*
> *BANG BANG open the door*
> *As the music goes back, everyone*
> *FUCK the police*
> *BANG BANG once again*
> *Everyone screaming and yelling*
> *FUCK the police*
> *BANG BANG it got louder*
> *As we are still partying not caring about the police*
> *BANG BANG the door broke down*
> *BANG BANG the police then said*
> *"EVERYBODY GET DOWN NOW!"*
> *All of a sudden everybody*
> *Got on the floor with their heart beating fast POUND POUND*
> *Then the police:*
> *Call for back up. COPY COPY*
> *send reinforcement*
> *BANG BANG OPEN THE DOOR*
> *BANG BANGBANGBANGBANGBANG*
> *And then the banging stopped and the party was all over*

- Section IVwas a conclusion. Beaty understood that he could no longer passively wait for his father's return and must teach himself to be an adult. Alisha chose a similar approach describing the growth that ensued from her difficult experiences: "…*because of you, you made me stronger, confident and persistent.*" Miguel wrote about the death of his beloved *abuelo* who raised him. Initially the loss was expressed in self-destructive behavior but eventually he chose to find strength and comfort in the memories which he used in a healing process.
- Section V had to do with a collective message lifting the story from the personal to the social. We did not get to this writing level with our students for lack of time.

A word-slam workshop

A few weeks into this project, we attended a workshop given by two word-slam artists to experience word-slamming in "real life." As students listened to the stories of the artists - one told about feeling alienated, lost and unsure of herself, her family and culture when arriving in the U.S. from Polynesia; the other spoke of a harsh childhood ending on a high note of pride at reaching the present point in her life - they realized that slamming one's story is something socially acceptable, a platform for voice even if the story tells of challenging experiences. The workshop highlighted the relevance of the word-slam format for telling personal stories and of using stories to connect to others, to learn from others' experiences (could be carried over to reading books, for example), and to share writing with their peers.

Presentations

Presenting their stories in class required great fortitude from the writers yet some rose to the occasion. Alisha took the risk, rose from her seat and read her poem:

> *DAD REST.IN.PEACE to your warm hugs and the comfort you gave me,*
> *irresistible smile, money and affection;*
> *You raised me into a blind little girl who couldn't believe your hate towards me*
> *was so strong*
> *that you left me behind and never looked back*
> *…*
> *But because of you*
> *You made me stronger confident and persistent.*
> *RIP to the neglect*
> *RIP to our memories*
> *RIP DAD*

The reading was done very quietly and the other students asked for a repeat. Surprised by the positive reception, Alisha agreed to come to the front of the room where she read again, louder and clearer. We were all listening.

Concluding Remarks

Writing personal stories provides a dynamic for teaching and learning nonfiction in schools and for invigorating the learning process. Stories can be a tool for creating a workable identity, for growing agency and for bridging into the curriculum. This can also be a challenging process: students who live vulnerable lives or who have experienced trauma and

refuse to "reveal" these aspects of their lives, others who, like Quan, choose to include expletives in their writing, or those who tell stories to jolt the reader, as Kohl (1994) writes, in willful rejection of the curriculum imposed on them. Our most important conclusions are as follows:

Learning is about building new knowledge upon existing knowledge (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). Every student comes into the classroom as expert and master, in the very least, of her personal story. Hence, *personal stories provide both common denominators and springboards for students to connect to and engage with other lives around them and with the new knowledge of our curriculums*.

Every student is part of multiple webs of relationships that impact their identities and behavior in school at every point of the day. This understanding would be overwhelming if not for its quite simple solution -*create a safe-space in the classroom and listen to the children first: where they are coming from will help you determine where to lead them*. Ask about their lives, about the night before, about their goals and dreams. Listen to the voices and to the silences.

To elicit student stories *teachers need to open up and offer their own stories* gently guiding students to realize that (a) we consider them knowing, feeling, understanding human beings worthy of sharing our experiences with, (b) revealing life's hurt or deep challenges in a safe-space can create empathy, community and better understanding of one's life, (c) we all go through similar experiences whether good or bad and can learn from each other how to respond and deal, and (d) life stories are not only about pain and suffering. There are many fun, positive stories that are part of who we are and can be strong foundations for learning (some boys told about winning sports matches and Shay wrote a humorous piece about losing his game then getting another for his birthday).

This type of qualitative research is of great value for proactively fine-tuning and improving practice. The ethnographic study in one's own classroom engages teachers as both participants and observers in an action research project with context-specific goals relevant to the particular needs and circumstances of *their* students. Data is comprised of close observations, descriptive and ethnographic notes of the classroom atmosphere in general, student behavior at specific points, what they say and what they don't, collections of artifacts such as students' writing, works of art and other classroom materials. All of the data then is analyzed and categorized through a reflective, close-reading process allowing the teachers to know their students in a deeper and more accurate way and to be able to adapt their teaching/strategy to the students' learning strengths, needs and abilities. Furthermore, when this research process involves ongoing reflection in and on action (Schön, 1995), changes, refinements, new understandings and new practices can be implemented immediately (no need to wait until the research project is done and written up!) for the benefit of the students' learning and engagement.

Our word-slam writing project opened gateways to voice for many of the students. Once they wrote and shared their stories, a more empathetic community emerged. Writing became a doable activity and critical reading from outside of school began finding its way into the classroom as more students were willing and able to be included in the learning discourse. Our work suggests that acknowledging the complexity and contextuality of every learner, her life experiences and learning process in a continuous process of reflection and correction, is a necessary component for building engagement in learning. Realizing (through trial, error and reflection) how to raise students' voices through stories and valuing those stories, lets us hear and see each other as worthy fellow human beings sharing a classroom and a world, increasing everyone's motivation to learn and grow.

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Article Citation