

Like Butter:

*Using Metaphor for Personal Narratives in
Local Treatment Center Language Arts Classrooms*

Leanne Grabel

*“Metaphors have a way of holding
the most truth in the least space.”*

Orson Scott Card

What

I spent the past dozen years as a Portland Public Schools language arts and special education teacher in a variety of local treatment centers. There was a residential lockdown treatment center for teen girls with criminal histories and charges. There was a hospital sub-acute unit for children, ages 6-18, with severe emotional dysregulation, a history of aggression, and suicidal ideation. There was a long-term last-chance rehabilitation center for teenage boys convicted of sexual offenses. Eighty percent of these students were receiving special education services for a variety of disabilities, both academic and emotional. Probably ninety percent of them had physical and sexual trauma in their past. A majority of them were wards of the state and the most common age was 15.

My instincts and rationale agreed with one another for once and suggested I prioritize the development of Voice as a learning target for these students. Up to this point, they had had no control or say over their lives or bodies. They had no Voice at all.

As a writer, and a victim of trauma myself, I knew the act of using one’s Voice—the act of writing one’s ugly story—could help—just help. The ugly dissipates with each telling. That’s my theory. I knew uncovering a clear, honest voice, and using it, crafting it, using it, crafting it could nurture, nourish, amuse, empower, and perhaps, even start to heal them. It had happened for me.

And Anyway

I wanted them to stay in my class the entire 45 minutes. They didn't have to. They could leave any time they wanted. That was part of their treatment plan. But I wanted them to stay. And I sort of took it personally when they left, which was my big mistake. I just wanted them to stay and to speak a little, write a little, laugh a little, start to enjoy their own words, learn a detail or two about apostrophes and poets.

And anyway, they were teenagers. And they were completely self-absorbed. Personal narrative was an easy first step.

Speak

I told my students I wanted them to write without fear and with utter honesty and they already knew how to do that. They just forgot. I told them re-discovering their Voice was going to be as easy as walking. I told them using their Voice was like playing the most beautiful instrument in the band. And the great thing was using their Voice required no extra gear, no cables, no amps, no gym membership, no tight polyurethane polymer pants. And no carrying cases.

I told them I wanted details. The best writing had the best details, the details that were vivid and true. If they grew up in a car, I wanted to know about the backseat upholstery—the feel of it, smell of it. I wanted to smell the ashtray, feel the muscle cramps, listen to the chorus of snores in the shelters inches from their ears.

Challenges

There were some definite challenges specific to a treatment center classroom. Fostering an environment of openness was essential, in my opinion, but it was like opening Pandora's Box. These were damaged, troubled teenagers. All their huge, ugly emotions began to rise up and bubble all over everybody like a geyser of slime. A teacher had to be comfortable with serious, physically displayed rage, for instance. And images and moments of utter defeat so

alarming, she might experience spontaneous, projectile sobs—singles, most the time.

Yes, there were therapists in the house. And yes, there were procedures in place. But still. The students' eyes in the morning could puncture a teacher. Pools of darkness seemed to grow each night like an algae bloom under their eyes. Like an ocean of woe. So there was that.

And, don't get me started on this one, but it was basically against the rules for these teenagers in treatment to tell their stories. It was called war storying and often involved point loss and consequences. Some administrators feared the telling of personal stories would trigger the storyteller. And they will trigger everybody in the room. And all Hell would break loose. Perhaps. But in a way, that would be a good thing.

The Answer?

Metaphor. That was the answer. Similes. Get them to detail out themselves and their lives using similes and metaphors. They could describe themselves as a fruit or a color or a cake or a shoe? If they were a cake, what kind would they be? Why? What kind of filling? What kind of frosting? What kind of cake before treatment? What kind of cake after? Metaphor could inspire deep reflection. And imagination. And connection-making. And metaphor could communicate meaning directly with one image. No personal information needed to be revealed. It could work.

For Inspiration

We spent a week reading and sharing great similes—Rilke, Cisneros, Simic, etc., etc. I urged my students to work on their own similes and metaphors until they were so honest and individual, listeners would shiver. We had a big discussion about clichés. They were strongly advised not to use them—and also how to save them by adding more detail. I created fill-in-the-blank-with-great-similes sheets. We shared them with a digital beat and a fast line-by-line round robin.

The Main Assignment

The expectation was they write (and later illustrate with photographs) a characterization of themselves before now, now, and after now. They were expected to go through all steps of the Writing Process, including writing several drafts, sharing, editing AND reading the piece out loud.

The Planning Sheet

I gave students a planning sheet that was broken into three columns (I Used To Be/Now I Am/I Want To Be) and 12 categories, such as color, smell, shoes, musical instrument, various foods, ice cream flavors, pizza details, playing card, finger, song . . .) I asked students to complete 3 categories minimum. And I told them they had to give a reason—*I used to be scissors. I was sharp and hurtful, but also useful to many*—for instance. It is not an easy assignment.

Peer Editing

Students chose an editing partner and the pairs found a spot in the room to establish a sense of privacy. The expectation was they each read their lines to each other but also hear their own lines read by their partners. I told them if the reader stumbled, there was no doubt trouble in that spot. The words were rocky there. And if they lost track of the meaning at any point, there was something wrong there. I told them a good writer writes to be understood. And I emphasized that they begin their feedback with what they loved—even if it was just two words put together.

Yes!

They talked to each other for most of the period. Their young foreheads were furrowed, their hands accentuating their reactions. No one got upset. They were crossing out words and lines, Rearranging things. A couple even asked for a Thesaurus. (Knock me over with a pin.)

Read Aloud

I asked them to read their lines to themselves out loud three times somewhere in a corner of the room. This would be a rehearsal before the all-class read-around. I wanted them to make sure every word was necessary, make sure every word was the best word, with the best sound, the best flow and most importantly, make sure they were telling the truth. (I gave them a half-page checksheet they had to initial each time they practiced out loud.)

Read-Around

One student read and the others, sitting in a circle, wrote their comments on feedback forms—what they loved, what was confusing or just didn't work. Everyone was respectful and caring and brilliant in their feedback—well, for the most part. Their attention and awareness brought tears to my eyes.

Final Draft

Students had the week to work on the final draft while the visual component began.

The Visual Component

The photographer came in. And the cameras (could be phones). (Could be the art teacher.) A small studio was set up with a set that included a fabric draped table and one spot light. Students gave me a list of items they wanted to photograph, all details from their writing. Each student could pick five items/details to photograph. They might choose, for instance, a banana, a stapler, a bowl of New York Fudge Chunk Ice Cream and a black high heel shoe. (NOTE: This could be a beautiful PowerPoint project if internet is available to students. The images can be culled from the Web.)

The Triptych Project

There are many ways to do this project—many expansions and extensions. I called this project the Triptych Project. Students saw themselves in the past, in the present and in the future. The

assignment made everyone think and reflect so hard, smoke came out of their ears.

And the Triptych Project inspired students to examine themselves in a very careful, mindful way. They had to consider their nuances, their essences. They had to make huge leaps across bridges they had to build in order to come up with these creative personal and highly informative metaphors.

They had to consider whether they were sour like cabbage or sweet like butterscotch pudding or hard like a stone. They had to be precise with their words. True. Lyrical. Rhythmic. Original. And they were. (See examples? [Have lots of student examples]).

Hope

And they had to envision a future. With details. They had to hope. And they did.

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