

True Stories from Philadelphia

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The title of this article means in triplicate. “True Stories from Philadelphia” is the title of the Project WRITE (Writing and Reading through Intergenerational Teaching Experiences) web site (<http://www.temple.edu/CIL/WRITEhome.htm>). “True story” also smacks a bit of gossip, the confession of some difficulty. And the phrase “true stories,” itself perhaps an oxymoron, also describes the type of epistemologically self-conscious writing I hope students generate in my service-learning composition classroom.

True Story 1: Course development and design

This spring is the second semester that the Temple University Writing Program, in conjunction with the Center for Intergenerational Learning (CIL) and the Institute for the Study of Literature, Literacy and Culture—both affiliated with Temple, is piloting a Project WRITE section of English 50. English 50 is the core writing course that most entering freshmen at Temple are required to take. Project WRITE has been in existence since 1987, though in a different form. In its previous incarnation, CIL identified and enrolled senior citizens from the community who wished to improve their reading and writing skills, and English Education sponsored a university course that examined literacy issues and trained students to be tutors. Changes in funding, however, required CIL to find a new departmental home for Project WRITE. In addition, there was a growing interest from the University Writing Program in “Writing Beyond the Curriculum,” in making connections between the academic training that students receive and the thinking and writing activities in which students could engage in partnership with members of the community. The English 50/Project WRITE pilot was born.

For literacy learners, the partnership is designed to meet a real community need. Philadelphia offers no other literacy program geared specifically toward older adults. Particular concerns of seniors as learners include ease and safety of travel, appropriate materials and space (older adults sometimes need bigger print or have difficulty hearing), and a feeling of community rather than alienation. Many older adults are socially disconnected and are looking for ways to associate with age peers as well as younger people (Weinstein-Shr; Hooyman and Kayak; Brown et al.). These seniors have lived full, skillful lives—working, raising families, living in neighborhoods—yet for many of them, reading and writing are obstructions rather than aids to communication, memory, learning or pleasure. Thus, learners are likely to feel “proud” in many senses of the word: pleased yet self-conscious. Project WRITE is an attempt to address some of these material and psychic needs, while also viewing the experiences

and knowledge of seniors as a resource. The project stems out of a philosophy of reciprocity, and unlike in a conventional tutoring model, the intention is for the learning to be two-way.

For students, the course is designed to meet a goal similar to other sections of English 50: to engage them in reading challenging texts from a variety of disciplines and writing about those texts in ways that are acceptable to the academy. As the instructor of the course, I have an additional overarching goal, which is to examine the assumption or “bumper sticker” (my pedagogical term for a commonplace, unexamined idea) that “literacy is power.” First, students need to “un-assume” literacy, both their own and that of the learners, in order to examine the authority and day-to-day power that literacy affords. However, both readings and assignments attempt to problematize the assumption that all literate acts are inherently powerful. Instead, I hope to work with students to develop a more complex notion of how literacy and power interact in particular contexts. As part of this intellectual project, I want students to engage in literate activity with learners and to reflect on those experiences in light of our theories-in-progress about literacy.

True Story 2: Implementation and obstacles

In both fall and spring, twenty-two students (the university cap) enrolled in my section of English 50. At Temple, instructors have some leeway about the theme of English 50 courses, as long as they take a multi-disciplinary approach that entails significant academic essay writing. Students, on the other hand, tend to enroll in a 50 course that fits their schedules; in the current course bulletin, all English 50s look alike. Thus, in both semesters, I faced 22 somewhat surprised students when I described the work of the course. I portrayed our tasks as not being greater than other sections, but certainly different. Despite—or maybe even because of?—this “difference,” no students dropped the course.

In the fall, several readings (and the flavor of many assignments) were taken from Bartholomae and Petrosky’s *Ways of Reading*, including essays by Paulo Freire, Richard Rodriguez, Gloria Anzaldua and Mary Louise Pratt; we also read chapters from Jonathan Kozol’s *Illiterate America*. Class discussions focused a great deal on language, the idea of differing discourse communities (although we did not use that term), and power relations as enacted in the classroom and through literacy. Over the course of the semester, students wrote an autoethnography of themselves as academic “outsiders” (an adaptation of a *Ways* assignment); wrote additional portions of their literacy autobiographies and reana-

lyzed them through a Freirian lens; constructed imagined arguments between Rodriguez and Anzaldua; and delivered group oral critiques on Kozol. One group created a game, “Buy it [i.e., Believe it] or Not!” When I requested that I not be on a team so that I could focus on evaluation, they told me that I “wasn’t the teacher right now” and insisted that I join the game. Some students expressed fury at the inaccessibility and “stupidity” of Pratt’s essay until I offered them an alternative to the autoethnography assignment, asking them instead to argue for or against the usefulness of Pratt’s invented term, “contact zone.”

And students tutored. The third week of class was devoted to a quick-and-dirty training by an experienced Center for Literacy (CFL) trainer and teacher who gave the students basics in whole language approaches to teaching reading and writing. CFL advocates “opportunistic teaching” for adult learners based on the belief that in the course of practicing real-life tasks, opportunities for teaching skills from decoding to punctuation will occur. Because I did not want to require an undue amount from students in terms of “lesson planning,” I had initially decided that students should specifically be trained in creating oral histories with their partners (see Lang and Ireland; McClenon; Mace). I assumed that students and learners would create and edit oral histories, and possibly read and respond to one other pair’s work over the seven-plus hours I was hoping they would meet. These meetings, except for an initial getting-to-know-you and match-up luncheon and the closing pre-publication party, were to take place outside of class time. Oral histories were to be published on the web site and, at the end of the spring semester, both terms’ work were to be printed in a book from the community press at the Institute for the Study of Literature, Literacy and Culture. My commitment to the students was that everyone who made an effort to meet with their learner, wrote brief weekly “field notes” about the experience, and wrote a final “analytic memo” would automatically receive an A for the service portion of the course.

I did not count on several things. The first was that some learners, most of whom had been involved in Project WRITE in its prior incarnation, did not “buy” the whole language approach to literacy learning. Some only wanted to read already published texts, and some questioned the benefit of writing an oral history. Others, mostly learners who had newly joined the project, were more taken by the idea of telling their stories and eventually seeing them in print. However, some of those participants were less interested in doing any writing or reading for themselves, perhaps because they were shy about showing any difficulties with literacy, others perhaps because they enrolled in order to make connections and keep busy. Of the nineteen adult learners who initially signed up to participate in the fall, only about one-quarter could read very little (one of these is the successful pastor of his own church, who entered able to write only his own name). Another quarter were quite competent readers and writers, with skills similar to those of the freshmen in my class, and others fell out in between.

However, I also did not count on the energy and creativity of some of the students in my class. Some combination of reading Freire, the learner-centered training by CFL, and human responsiveness on the students’ part made them bring plaintive reports back to the class that their learners were either not interested in doing an oral history or would not read or write themselves—what should they do? Wasn’t that “required” to get the promised A that was 15% of their grade? I encouraged my students to be flexible and to ask learners what their goals were, and to do their best to work toward one goal in the limited time they had together. Many classes began with a check-in and trouble-shooting time. I imagine that my professional and academic background in adult literacy made this type of “teaching from the hip” less anxiety-producing for me as an instructor than it would have been for someone with less experience in this area.

Some of the most successful partnerships included a pair that met at Temple’s library and used computer technology to enlarge the print of newspaper headlines. Another student introduced a more advanced learner to e-mail (which she used to write to her daughter) and helped the learner to write out a living will. This student mentioned in conference how working on the project had profoundly changed the way she thought about life and death. Another more advanced learner wanted to organize a neighborhood clean-up, and her partner helped her to write letters to this end. One learner began writing her memoirs, and another, a woman over ninety years old, regained her interest in poetry. A more beginning learner wrote an oral history of just three paragraphs with her student partner; at the pre-publication party, the learner stood and read this piece of writing, slowly but with few hesitations, the student sitting at her elbow, silently mouthing the words she had grown to know by heart as the older woman read them out loud.

Of course some partnerships were less successful or less intimate. Some students never managed to meet their learners or met only once. In some of those cases, the learner dropped out of the program for health, family or other reasons; in a few cases, I suspect that students were less than enthusiastic about pursuing meetings. Other students had difficulty finding appropriate techniques. One student, for example, partnered with the extremely low-literate pastor, made an excellent connection, but the two made the somewhat disappointing decision to work on reading *The Cat and the Hat*, even though the pastor’s most pressing need is to be able to read the Bible. My guess is that several factors contributed to these unsuccessful or less skillful matches. One was, as noted above, the inability of students to self-select into a service course. Perhaps more to the point, given many Temple students’ busy work and school schedules, would be their difficulty in selecting *out* of such a course. A second factor was time. I initiated the course and served—while still engaged in my own graduate studies—as both the instructor and the project coordinator. While this dual role had its advantages, it was often difficult to do the follow-up necessary to help along stalled matches. In addition, given the

constraints of a three-credit, one-semester course, matches that did not work out right away were difficult to salvage. A final factor that I would not want to discount could have been, for want of better words, karma and personality—some pairs just “clicked” and some just didn’t.

In all, thirteen of the initial nineteen matches (several learners were matched with two students) seemed at least somewhat successful, meaning that the partners met for more than three hours and exchange and learning were evident. The modal time spent together was five hours, and three pairs spent nine hours or more together. Ten oral histories were produced, which can be viewed at the Project WRITE website.

Students and learners alike appeared to enjoy and gain from the project. If the pictures from our pre-publication party are any indication (some can also be viewed on the website), partners really seemed to enjoy each other’s company. Anonymous student evaluations overwhelmingly described the service-learning aspect of the course as enjoyable and worthwhile. Many students also reported that they found the course to be more interesting and challenging than what they knew of their friends’ English 50 courses. Equally significant, over half the learners who completed the fall semester returned.

This spring the course has been modified in an attempt to address some of the hurdles from last semester. The major change is that students and learners are meeting primarily in class now, once per week. With the cooperation of the University Writing Center, we have access to a computer lab, where pairs can view the WRITE website as well as utilize other Internet and writing software resources. Learners from last semester were thrilled to see their stories “in print,” and perhaps they will now be more willing to “buy in” to the whole language approach believed to be the most effective method of literacy learning (Stasz). Another change is that learners have explicitly chosen a self-defined goal to work on, rather than having to struggle against my predetermined goal of an oral history. In addition to producing a piece of writing, learners have expressed interest in learning about computers and reading materials such as newspapers, street signs and the Bible. The in-class meetings mean that students are more closely supported but also more closely observed by me as their instructor, and I am curious to discover whether the level of creativity, intimacy and competence that some pairs attained last semester will be achieved in this new context.

True Story 3: Goals and reflections

A “story” is an anecdote, a yarn, a rumor, a legend—at its most objective, perhaps an account or a narrative. Stories are perspectival and contextual at minimum; sometimes the best stories are outright lies. Something that is “true” is, by contrast, factual, accurate, proper, correct. The tension captured in the phrase “true stories” helps me think about what I would like my students to write as well as how I would like them to read in my courses.

One of the promising aspects of a project such as WRITE is that it allows students to look for what is “true” by “reading the world” in addition to the “word” (Freire). Students find that “facts” are not swigged from books but are fashioned; epistemology is made visible. As students read and write about literacy, they learn that facts are prevailing stories, stories that have contextual, perspectival, and therefore question-able, truth. Facts are constructed, even by students themselves.

The final assignment of the course is a multi-stage process in which students gather the field notes they have written over the semester, review them, and hand in an “analytic memo.” This memo, a type of extended “note to self,” is a strategy that ethnographers use to begin to make sense of their findings. I encourage students to look for themes, patterns, changes or recurrent questions in what they have written over the semester. In the fall, I gave suggestions as to what students might include in their field notes—what occurred that day, questions or emotions that came up, what they thought the learner had gained, what they noticed or learned themselves, a particular fragment of conversation that stuck with them. In the spring, I made some of these suggestions mandatory, as many students in the fall had fallen behind in their field notes or had written very little.

The second stage of the process is to engage in praxis—to bring theory and practice together. In the fall, we re-viewed the readings in terms of three analytical frameworks on literacy/language: traditional (Rodriguez), critical liberatory (Freire, Kozol), and critical multicultural (Pratt, Anzaldúa). Rather than give an all-purpose final paper assignment, I encouraged students to authentically reflect on their experiences and to create a “case study” of their learners or of themselves in interaction with their learners; this “data” would be the evidence used in their papers. Required to use at least one of the readings to shape, support or contrast with their argument, students chose—among others—theses concerning the intersections of racism and literacy, education and class stratification, intergenerational learning as an educational “contact zone,” and systemic educational reform. One student concluded her paper:

The high population of illiterate Americans is a result of a lack of funding for literacy programs. E [the learner] was lucky to have found a program for her but what about the rest of the people who have suffered just like her? How do we help other Americans obtain literacy? In order to improve the economic conditions of the unfortunate illiterate we must give them the education they need to excel themselves in today’s society. This means literate people, like you and me, must get involved and use our literacy to assist others to gain theirs. I have awoken. I realize what advantages and options literacy gives me and have helped to fight the battle against illiteracy by becoming a tutor. What have you done? Wake up.

This student is telling several “true stories”—about literacy, about the learner she worked with, and about herself. Certainly her paper is only one way to tell these stories. Bruce Herzberg suggests that “the goal of critical pedagogy is to help students see and analyze the assumptions they make...” (65). Participating in WRITE appears to have challenged some of the assumptions that this student made—assumptions about the causes of illiteracy and her own privilege. On the other hand, a plethora of other assumptions are suggested by this paragraph—ideas about a connection between literacy and “suffering” and about individual solutions to social problems, to name just two. Any interrogation of ideas is always partial, a perspectival story. Rather than judging the success or failure of a class based on whether every student overturns a particular set of assumptions about education, literacy or language—though I, like Herzberg, wonder what goes wrong when this doesn’t happen—I am pleased when more students than not seem to grow in the sense that they can create “knowledge,” recognizing that knowledge is, in fact, methodical reflection on experience and an historical, unfinished project.

A comment made during training week by an outspoken spring semester student speaks to the importance of authorizing student knowledge and skill. When the CFL trainer mentioned that it was okay for students to tell learners when they didn’t know an answer, that they could find out together, a student said, “But if we say that we don’t know how to do something, won’t they think, ‘Hey, this guy is as stupid as me?’” The question reveals assumptions not only about the low-literate senior citizens he would meet the next class, assumptions that hopefully have by now been challenged, but also about his own competence and authority as a literate actor. I am interested in how the process of, as Bartholomae and Petrosky put it, *strong reading* applies when the reading is of the world:

Reading...can be an occasion for you to put things together, to notice this idea or theme rather than that one...[W]hen you forge a reading of a story or an essay, you make your mark on it, casting it in your terms. But the story makes its mark on you as well, teaching you not only about a subject...but about a way of seeing and understanding a subject. (Bartholomae and Petrosky 3-4)

Composition classrooms are appropriate settings for strong reading of experience, of critical praxis that works on problematizing assumptions. They also can allow beginning students to glimpse what professionals and academics often only see once they are making their way in their work: that stories are made true through context, use and authority and that they have histories, perspectives and gaps to be seen and filled.

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