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"The Day I Was Born": The Tale of Two Student Teachers and a Bungled Internet Research Project

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In "Silences in Our Teaching Stories: What Do We Leave Out and Why," Thomas Newkirk proposes that the field of English has an overly strong tendency to tell solely classroom success stories (See also Bramblett and Knoblauch; Lensmire; Taylor; Tobin; and Mandrell, among others). As a result, individual English teachers too often feel frustrated, disappointed, and vulnerable when their classrooms don't reflect these idealized narratives. To resolve this problem, Newkirk proposes that English teachers share "new stories that explore the issues that success stories leave out" (6). He claims, "It's time we tell the whole story of our teaching. No holds barred" (8).

What follows is a no-holds-barred classroom narrative about two student teachers and a bungled Internet research project. The two student teachers initially believe they have discovered an ideal method, in this case a method for incorporating technology in the classroom for a research assignment. Unfortunately, the assignment doesn't go as planned and the two teachers can't help but feel frustrated, disappointed and vulnerable, just as Newkirk explains. By reflecting on the experience and telling the story with their English Department representative, however, the two student teachers learn more about their 8th grade students, themselves and the art of teaching writing than they might have if the assignment had fulfilled its original promise.

In this way, this teaching narrative serves two purposes. First and most obviously, it teaches the pedagogical principle the two student teachers learned: No matter how "cool" any website is, teachers must carefully evaluate it in light of their own objectives and then make any necessary adjustment, just as they do for novels, short stories or any other print text to be included in the classroom curriculum. Second and equally important, the narrative responds directly to Newkirk's call in "Silences in Our Teaching Stories." By sharing this provocative story, we hope other teachers will be encouraged—encouraged in their classrooms when teaching snafus inevitably happen and encouraged in self confidence to share their own "no hold barred" stories.

First Impressions: The English Department Representative Begins

On a snowy Michigan morning, I (Elizabeth) make the three-hour drive from Central Michigan University to Pierce Middle School in Redford, just north of Downtown Detroit. As the English Department representative, I am granted time to visit approximately ten English majors just twice during their student teaching experiences. These two observations represent a small, but valiant, attempt to keep student teachers connected to their home department and to provide both assessment and support regarding content knowledge and methods.

This particular trip to Redford is made difficult by icy roads and heavy traffic, but I know the drive is worth it as soon as I see Christine Luoma and Shae Potocki, two excellent former composition methods students coincidently student teaching in the same building, department and grade level (8th grade). They are even holding writing workshops in adjoining computer labs, no less! As Christine and Shae explain, they are not technically team teaching; however, their cooperating teachers work collaboratively on most assignments, so the same has been true for them all semester. Back on campus, Christine and Shae hardly knew each other, but at Pierce Middle School, they are together constantly, sharing ideas and lessons, as well as triumphs and blunders. When they hold writing workshops in the adjoining computer labs, the door is

always open so they can cross over to seek advice or counsel from each other. The situation strikes me as ideal.

On my observation day, Christine's and Shae's students are conducting Internet research for a project called "The Day I Was Born," and the sole source is a website by the same name (Campanella). With a little prompting, a student happily demonstrates how easy the site is to navigate. A person simply goes to www.stphilipneri.org/teacher/dayiwasborn/, "clicks here" (a designated spot) and then follows the step-by-step directions, eventually leading to twelve links: (1) How Old Are You? (2) The Man in the Moon & You, (3) Literary Giants Were Little Babies Once, (4) What Else is New/s? (5) Rock & Roll Baby, (6) On This Day—NYT, (7) The History Channel—Technology on Your Day, (8) The TV Channel, (9) Your Toys, (10) At the Movies, (11) What's in a Name? and (12) If You Really Were a Viking Baby. To gain a stronger sense of both the website and the assignment, I later visit *The Day I Was Born* and decide to research February 5, 1959, the birthday of Governor Jennifer Granholm, the first woman governor of Michigan. Here is a smattering of information to be found:

- To date, Governor Granholm is 16, 908 days old (or 48 years, 3 month, and 7 days). "Jennifer," which means pure, was a popular US name in the late 1950s and early 1960s.
- Dwight Eisenhower was the US president, and Richard Nixon was the vice president in 1959; the week of Granholm's birth, the US successfully test-fired the Titan ICBM.
- *Perry Mason* and *The Price is Right* were favorite TV shows the year that Granholm was born, while Paul Anka's "Lonely Boy" and Bobby Darin's "Mack the Knife" were top songs. Barbie dolls, hula hoops, trolls, and the Game of Life were all new toys.
- Top-selling books were Elizabeth George Speare's *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* and William Strunk and E.B. White's *The Elements of Style*; *Ben-Hur* and *North by Northwest* were blockbuster hits.
- US prices were considerably lower (bread - $.20/loaf, milk - $1.01/gallon and stamps - $.04/each) and so were salaries (the average income was $5,976 a year and minimum wage was $1.00 an hour).
- On February 5, 1937, President Roosevelt proposed increasing the number of Supreme Court justices, and he was criticized for trying to stack the deck.
- Hank Aaron shares a birthday with Granholm; so do Patricia Louber, Joan Elma Rahn, and David Wiesner (authors), as well as Alex Harvey and Al Kooper (singers).
- Granholm was born in British Columbia; however, no information was provided regarding Canada.

Christine, Shae, and I all agree that "The Day I Was Born" assignment appears perfectly suited for 8th graders. After all, thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds, with their evolving and often fragile identities, are naturally interested in a topic as personal as their birthdays. Moreover, most Young Adults love surfing the Internet "elbow to elbow" with friends, so engagement is high for this reason too. Last, students are using technology to learn about historical facts—including political events, sports happenings and pop culture—from the early 1990s, perhaps making insightful comparisons between the present and not-so-distant past. It's all good.

After walking around the two computer labs, checking out students' progress, and taking a field note or two, I ask Christine and Shae about the capstone activity for the assignment, and the women smile wryly, exchanging knowing sideways glances. Originally, the capstone activity was a "traditional," five-paragraph research paper, but then Shae's cooperating teacher suggested that they experiment by writing their own papers, and so working separately on their home computers, Christine and Shae began confidently. Though researching their birthdays was easy using *The Day I Was Born* website, writing the paper proved to be far more difficult. Though the two women could have easily written individual paragraphs regarding, for example, US food prices, top-selling toys, or hit songs for their birthdays, what rhetorical question or hook would hold everything together? What was the exigency or impetus for such a paper other than listing three groups of factoids? In short, what was the *So What* (Atwell 38-47)? After several failed attempts, Christine and Shae telephoned each other and shared that their papers were

going nowhere. Even more importantly, they said that if they were having this much trouble, what would happen to their 8th graders? And so the two women put their heads together again and came up with an alternate assignment: instead of a paper, students would create "The Day I Was Born" posters.

As an English educator, I confess that I love this story, primarily because of the role played by Shae's cooperating teacher. After all, we all know writing a paper before assigning it is a good idea, but how many English teachers actually take—or can even find—the time to do so with their overtasked teaching lives? By finding and taking the time, these new teachers have done more than design a better, more innovative capstone; they demonstrate teacherly foresight, student-centeredness and writing-as-a-process pedagogy. I believe, too, that they have learned a valuable lesson to carry throughout their careers, and both Christine and Shae seem to agree.

Driving back to campus that afternoon, I continue to reflect upon Christine and Shae's student teaching experiences at Pierce Middle School, especially as they relate to "The Day I Was Born." I believe that English teachers—pre-service and in-service alike—would benefit from hearing their story, so I decide to email them over the next few weeks with an idea: What about submitting a panel proposal for the annual fall conference sponsored by the Michigan Council of Teachers of English?

What Really Happened:
The Student Teachers Continue

When Dr. Brockman's email arrives, our mouths drop literally to the floor. We don't know what to say to her, so neither of us respond at all and we do what we've done all semester: talk to each other. How could we lead an MCTE panel on "The Day I Was Born"? In the beginning, the project sounded like such a cool, technology-related assignment, the kind of assignment every pre-service teacher wants; however, our plans went awry. As the previous section explains, the original capstone was a research paper that didn't work out, so we assigned a poster. By proposing the MCTE conference panel, Dr. Brockman obviously assumes that the poster was a successful alternative, and but the poster, though a far a better assignment than the paper ever would have been, introduced an entirely new set of problems.

Here's what happened: We asked students to divide their posters into three sections, with each section summarizing one historical fact or event. Our objective was to teach effective summary writing, including the five Ws (who, what, where, when, why), which is why we opted for this approach. The trouble is that the twelve Internet links on the site all feature summaries of historical facts and events, so we were essentially asking our students to write summaries of summaries. Writing summaries of summaries didn't meet our teaching objectives; that aside, though, it would seem utterly pointless. Another problem was documentation. One key objective was to introduce students to basic conventions associated with MLA quoting and citing for print materials, but the website did not always provide the necessary information (author, title, print source, date, and page numbers) to create a parenthetical citation, let alone a complete works cited. Despite all the class time devoted to MLA format for print sources, we constantly had to bend the documentation rules, which didn't seem right.

To resolve these problems, we suggested that students focus especially on two *The Day I Was Born* links associated with the *New York Times* and History Channel. Our thought was that students would explore both links and gather more information from different sources, but this plan didn't work either. In general, the NYT articles were too few in number and too difficult for our students to read and understand, so we changed the plan yet again and allowed students to focus solely on the History Channel articles. This approach worked, but we still felt as if we were constantly modifying the assignment as we kept running into new problems.

On some level, we quietly wished that we could simply abandon this Internet assignment all together, but that option wasn't available to us, as student teachers. First, we knew that we were guests in our cooperating teachers' classrooms, and Shae's cooperating teacher especially valued "The Day I Was Born" project—she had suggested the assignment in the first place. Christine's cooperating teacher had agreed to come on board and we wanted them both to be happy with us by meeting all their expectations.

Equally important, our students just loved the technology aspect of the assignment. Day after day, they said and showed us a dozen times that *The Day I Was Born* was a fabulous website, so they were fully engaged in the research project. In that regard, we can't deny even now that the assignment was a good educational experience.

When the poster alternative didn't work, though, we felt stressed out and frustrated. Think sleepless nights! Lots of sleepless nights! We wished that we could have assigned a multi-genre research paper, an idea we briefly considered in the brainstorming stage of the unit. However, many composition specialists (see Romano for an especially good discussion) indicate that multi-genre research papers are complex and time consuming, and there were only three weeks to complete the entire project, so this kind of project was not a viable capstone option. In the end, we forged ahead with the poster.

In the meantime, though, neither of us has responded to Dr. Brockman's email about the conference panel, and her second (and final) observation is rapidly approaching. On the day of her visit, we once again are completing similar lessons, this time asking students to conduct a self-assessment of a recent science fiction unit. As usual, Dr. Brockman is all smiles and questions. What is science fiction, as a genre? Do our students really understand its genre features? What is the difference between science fiction and fantasy, and where do *Harry Potter* and *Star Wars*, as two well-known examples, fit? We talk a long time after class, focusing especially on the paper assignment (students are analyzing why their independent reading book might be defined as science fiction), but then the conversation meanders to other relevant topics: our upcoming graduation, possible job openings, summer vacations plans, and eventually. . . "The Day I Was Born."

Dr. Brockman admits that she has wondered at our silence, but she says that she respects how busy we have been and has simply attributed it to our hectic teaching schedules. No problem. Without pausing, she explains that she has read an interesting "call for manuscript," which strikes her as a perfect fit for "The Day I Was Born," and asks *are we interested in not only proposing the panel, but also putting together a manuscript?* Dr. Brockman poses the idea as a question, but we can see that she hopes we will want to move forward with both projects, so we know it is time to come clean. We explain what a disaster we believe "The Day I Was Born" has been from start to finish, including even the poster assignment. At the time, we don't see how to salvage anything positive that would be worth sharing with other English teachers.

In response, Dr. Brockman remains positive. After listening to our concerns, she reminds us that all teaching experiences—both good and bad—are meaningful and worthy of further consideration. To clarify, she mentions a few relevant readings from our composition methods classes, and she challenges us to continue thinking about "The Day I Was Born." What did we learn from the experience about student writers, research writing, the Internet and ourselves? What could other pre- and in-service teachers learn? She tells us that she will spend time in the coming weeks considering the teaching implications of our experience, and she encourages us to do the same.

The Day I Was Born Revisited: The Student Teachers and the Departmental Representative Reflect

As the cooperating teachers required, we (Christine and Shae) hoped to introduce students to Internet research for the purpose of writing summaries and using MLA format. Though research goals other than summarizing and citing obviously exist, all three of us respected the cooperating teachers' choices and so, with just these two goals in mind, revisited *The Day I Was Born* website. Skipping over the twelve Internet links, we analyzed solely the teachers' supporting materials and learned the articulated purpose: to introduce the Internet to 4th – 6th graders and make it fun and accessible. Though related, this purpose is not identical to the teaching objectives for the Internet research project described in this essay. Though webmasters claim that the site is useful for middle school, high school and even college-age students, nearly each classroom link highlights elementary students' written work typically in the form of short and informal introductions, personalized newsletters or whole-class websites with graphics galore. Formal research papers, objective summaries and works cited pages were nowhere to be found at the time. As such,

the Web page doesn't seem to have been designed with a formal research paper in mind, as the cooperating teachers required.

So what to do?

One option would be to tweak the poster assignment. Instead of a poster with three summaries (reminiscent of five-paragraph essays), why not ask students to design a more free flowing and personalized poster, one with a student's baby picture surrounded by a colorful mélange of slogans, song lyrics, TV/movie titles, factoids, and clip art—all related to their birthdays? Sounds like fun, doesn't it? Students could mount this kind of poster for display in their own bedrooms, or the poster would undoubtedly make a wonderful "gift of writing," as Nancie Atwell defines the phrase:

> [Gifts of writing] last. They're personalized and more personal than most other gifts. They show more thought: the writer spends a special kind of time and made a special kind of effort. They show a writer's love better than anything. You can make your mother, father, or granny cry. (Lesson 47)

In *Lessons That Change Writers*, Atwell demonstrates "gifts of writing" primarily with examples of student poetry designed as Christmas and Mother's or Father's Day gifts; they are fabulous, to be sure. However, a "The Day I Was Born" poster would make just as great a gift.

As a "gift of writing," however, the poster would not require documentation; and with no documentation, the assignment would not achieve the required teaching objectives, and so another viable option would be to reimagine *The Day I Was Born* website. Instead of a "cyberspace destination," students might imagine it, to continue the intergalactic metaphor, as a "launch pad." Let us explain. A birthday may seem like a narrow focus because it represents a single day, but a single day is actually a very broad topic, maybe even gargantuan, so why not ask students to narrow the focus? Ask students to surf *The Day I Was Born*, consider all the political events, sports happenings, and pop culture associated with their birthdates, and then choose one—*only one*—to research. With this approach, Governor Granholm (if she were a Pierce Middle School student) might cull the bulleted list (found in the first section of this essay) and decide to research solely Hula Hoops, "Mack the Knife," or *Perry Mason*, or she might decide to focus on solely the Titan ICBM, the 1937 Supreme Court justices, or Hank Aaron. These are just a few examples. The point is that *The Day I Was Born* website could function for middle and high school students as a planning or prewriting tool during topic selection. Once students have selected topics, they would essentially begin their research by locating key print and electronic sources beyond *The Day I Was Born* Web page.

> *"No matter how cool the text (electronic or otherwise), teachers need to consider their classroom goals, including teaching objectives and age-group appropriateness, before assigning it."*

Regardless of whether (a) tweaking the poster assignment, (b) reimagining *The Day I Was Born* website, or (c) never returning to it again is the best pedagogical choice, we are wiser and more computer savvy English teachers. Like most teachers, we learned in our undergraduate programs the importance of assessing the overall quality and credibility of a Web page, just like any print source, when students conduct research. This experience, however, taught a new lesson: the importance of evaluating a Web page in light of teaching objectives, especially when an entire unit is at stake.

Most obviously, teachers need to look beyond the technological "bells and whistles" and remember that a required Web page is truly no different than a required novel, film or any other text an entire class will read. No matter how cool the text (electronic or otherwise), teachers need to consider their classroom goals, including teaching objectives and age-group appropriateness, before assigning it. If the website fits the objectives and the age

group, fine; if it doesn't, though, some adjustment must be made. By learning this pedagogical principle, we came away from our student teaching experience better prepared to incorporate technology in our own classrooms. In short, then, we benefited from the experience, and so will our future students.

Final Words:

The Department Representative Concludes

Christine and Shae were initially reluctant to talk or write about "The Day I Was Born," and their reluctance is easy to understand. First of all, it was human nature: we all prefer sharing triumphs over bungles. As such, Christine and Shae would have been far more comfortable examining for public consumption the self-assessment activity, the science fiction unit or their collaborative student teaching experience. Who can blame them? Equally important, the women were student teachers: newbies who felt anxious, vulnerable and even exposed. Would "The Day I Was Born" hurt their teaching evaluations? Could sharing it somehow thwart their upcoming job searches? The answer to both questions is clearly no, but both women admitted to feeling stress and losing sleep over "The Day I Was Born," so why add to the drama?

Why, indeed?

Most obviously, reflecting about the experience was productive for them professionally. Christine and Shae's story brings to mind Ruth Vinz's claim that teachers should reflect about classroom experiences in three overlapping ways: retrospectively, introspectively and prospectively (27-28). In his influential *The English Teacher's Companion*, Jim Burke commends Vinz for this observation and describes it:

> Vinz characterizes *retrospective* as thinking back on a lesson, a moment, a unit and remembering and examining what happened. This looking backward from the relative safety of the present allows you the critical distance you need to then get *introspective*: . . . to look within [yourself] to understand what happened, why it happened, what [you] really thought or felt about it . . . The last phase is . . . *prospective*. In this phase, the reflective teacher begins to speculate what would happen if they taught the same materials in a different way . . . they see the class as a dynamic place and give themselves permission to learn what they must to be a better teacher. (278)

Even further, Burke claims that especially new teachers should get in the habit of reflection very early in their careers. In fact, he claims, "If you don't establish the habit of reflection, you are not likely to pick it up later" (278). He also notes that a habit of reflection encourages new teachers to "move away from insecure[ity] toward confiden[ce] and fluen[cy]" in their teaching (278). In light of Burke's remarks, we can celebrate, then, that Christine and Shae engaged in retrospective, introspective and prospective reflection all semester by virtue of their dual student teaching placements. They had ample time to talk and talk and talk on a daily basis. Even further, the writing of this very manuscript provided opportunities for retrospective, introspective and prospective reflection.

However, sharing "The Day I Was Born"—and other potentially unsettling teaching experiences—is good not only for the individual teacher, but also for the entire field of English Education, as Vinz suggests:

> Do teachers yearn for right answers and success stories? Perhaps the professional literature shows too many success stories and not enough stories of the messy and chaotic work of sorting through options, interrogating values, or making hard decisions . . . .(9-10)

Vinz's comments bring us full circle to Tom Newkirk's previously mentioned claims in "Silences in Our Teaching," reminding us that Christine and Shae could have chosen to tell only part of their story or to share nothing at all. Either option would have been a silence in their teaching, as Tom Newkirk defines the phrase. By choosing, instead, to tell the "no-holds barred" version, though, Christine and Shae break the silence that too often characterizes teaching narratives, especially for new teachers. In doing so, they most obviously share an important message about incorporating technology in the classroom: No matter how "cool" any website is, teachers must carefully evaluate it and then make any necessary

adjustment. Equally important, however, Christine and Shae demonstrate teacherly courage and integrity in sharing the "no holds barred" version of their story. In breaking the silence, they grew professionally and, as a result, became better equipped to face and manage with greater confidence, assurance and security the "ups and downs" of day-to-day teaching. In reading this teaching story and then reflecting upon their own classroom bungles, *LAJM* readers will benefit in the same productive way.

Endnote

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