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Connecting Narratives: Students' Lives and High School Literature

Dirk Brines

Toward the end of August I started to feel the heat. I got this restless, agitated feeling like some part of my life was over and I was about to be summoned forth to begin a deeply challenging span in my bridge to eternity. I tried to adjust my sleep schedule so that I was not tempted to watch any late-night television. I tried to get up at 0600 hours like I was doing in the spring. On a day that gets the same kind of hype as a holiday, I pulled on a pair of long trousers for the first time in weeks and a neatly ironed shirt and peddled off to school on my wife's metallic, blue Schwinn Varsity ten-speed with the commuter baskets on the back.

Getting a Preview

When I got to school, I went to my room first, of course, and then to the office to look inside my mail box. I pulled out six weeks' mail and shuffled through the brochures and junk. There were a few treasures, including my class lists. I put down the rest of the pile so I could see just whom I would teach. The second class list got the most attention, and not because the students were very, very good. I read the names a second and then a third time. The names were very, very familiar; and I didn't read them with any particular joy. Not again! This would be our fourth year in a row together. I taught most of the students United States history in the eighth and ninth grades. Then I had them for English 10, and now for American Literature.

The names have a lot of different stories attached to them; some they told to me, and some I told about them. Some of what I know about these kids, I simply gain by inference. One is pregnant as a result of last spring's fever. The rest are taller and have deeper voices which utter profanity easily. They are not rich, but neither am I. They are not too bright, but not dumb either. I have that in common

with them as well. Most of them are guided by powerful emotions more than they are by powerful reason. We share that trait. In summary, we are more alike than we are different.

The fourth time I looked at the list, I realized that in many ways I care about my students. I want them to have good jobs and full lives. I realized I am no better than they are, just a little better educated is all. And then I wondered how I would teach them about the proud traditions of American thought and language; I struggled with what to do in the first part of the course because I figured it would not keep them interested. I also doubted that many of their thoughts were transcendental. I concluded that I would skip pieces that are old and abstract and move to modern literature before too long.

Creating a Beginning

One of the first pieces I teach is Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. I decided to try to stimulate some connections between my students and the people of Salem. I asked them to write on one of the following ideas:

1. Have you every been falsely accused of something you didn't do?
2. Have you ever been persecuted for no reason?
3. Do you think that the government is too involved in our lives?

The overwhelming favorite was the first question. That is also the one I chose, and to show that I wasn't afraid to share my life, I read my story, too. I even went first. I wrote about the time I was accused of pulling the distributor wires off a teacher's car at a dance, leaving her stranded in the dark. Even though I wasn't "the" wire puller, I had to work the day of the class field trip with some other guys washing all of the wooden folding chairs

stored in the loft above the bus garage. There were 1500 chairs in all. By the time I got done washing those chairs and cleaning the loft, I wished I had been “the” wire puller. My students liked the story. For the first time in three weeks, every one was absorbed in what I was saying. They laughed, and they said they thought I was stupid for taking the heat along with the other guys. I told them I understood how they feel when one of their friends is in trouble and doesn’t want to face it alone. That must be the way the women of Salem felt when they were accused of witchcraft and knew they would hang.

That was not the end of the lesson. Kids started sharing their stories. There were lots of stories, but two of them corroborated. Two guys in my class had jobs at the same local grocery and had been falsely accused of the same crime. The store has a storage basement where the owner had placed some cases of beef jerky, an item which is fairly expensive and easy to conceal. They were questioned separately and both denied the theft. They knew the manager’s little brother did it, but the owner would not believe my students were telling the truth. They both got fired. One of the students got very emotional in class. The anger rose in him as he read. He said, “When I knew he (the manager’s brother) lied about me, I wanted to break his scrawny little neck. I didn’t care about the job; I was pissed that he lied about me.” Now he could understand the connection between the women of Salem and Abigail Williams.

Making Connections

I was glad to get beneath the surface of my students’ lives. The people I teach are more real and important to me now than when I stood there gazing at names on a list the first day of school 1998. These are what we call teachable moments. When students connect their own narratives with what they read, comprehension and involvement dramatically increases. I think students will read just about anything if they can see that the teacher has made some intellectual and emotional investment in it, and if they can also connect it to themselves. I know that if I do it right, they can read and understand just about anything; however, I try to introduce stories that I believe will be most relevant. I remember what my life was like at sixteen. In fact, I spend a lot of time hauling out memories and dusting them off like we did those folding chairs.

Looking at What I Do

As I make curriculum choices, I know I have to take into consideration some important factors. The one I usually think about the hardest is what do I teach. The one which usually gets the least attention is who am I teaching. I’m suggesting that

we do a great paradigm switch and consider the latter first. As far as technology goes, it wouldn’t matter so much what vehicle we were to use. If kids are personally and deeply connected to what they do, they are more likely to stay aboard for the entire ride. If they are engaged by their work, they perform better. It doesn’t make sense to create lessons driven by content with little or no focus on people.

Students are the content of our courses. Their words, experiences, and ideas must become substantive. The irony is that while I argue that no single interpretation of literature could be perfect, I seldom allow students the opportunity to express their interpretations. Instead, I tend to be rather literal in my approach. I have given some ground on the issue. As a result, I have found techniques which bring the students more actively to our shared text. My dissatisfaction with my teaching started as a result of my dissatisfaction with the work my students did, especially in their writing. It was void, empty of any real conviction or meaning. When I started looking for answers, they fell on me: I was the leader. I was setting the tone. I started to model more of what I wanted them to get out of the work. I shared my writing and more truth about myself. I brought in evidence to show that I really have lived. Eventually, I saw myself in a different light. No longer the assigner and evaluator, I became a real player and a participant. All of this means more to me than just going through the stories and closing the book on them forever.

Creating a Lesson

One of the stories I share with my students is Alice Walker’s “Everyday Use” from our anthology. It is basically about two sisters who have a clash of wills about a family heirloom, a quilt made by their great-grandmother. Naturally, they both want the quilt. If you have ever been involved in an estate settlement, you understand. From the beginning, I try to engage my students in the conflict in a passionate way. Eventually, the conflict becomes clear: The sisters are not fighting over an antediluvian bed cover; their struggle becomes a question of who is better and more deserving. You’ll have to read the story to find out who gets the quilt. At any rate, the challenge is getting the students emotionally invested in the story.

There are ways. Knowing about Alice Walker helps students understand and relate to the story’s source. They see that authors are people who have had life experiences similar to their own. Learning about authors and their “ordinary” lives also helps students to understand that they also are qualified to be storytellers and writers because writers write mostly about life. After they learn about Walker, they understand where her story elements origi-

nate. I tell my students that while we read Walker's story, she is a member of our class. Walker's experience becomes our experience because she has shared it with us in a very intimate way. In fact, I think that reading teaches people how to have intimate relationships on an intellectual and spiritual level.

The next step I take in the lesson is to introduce words from the story I think will cause students difficulty. In teaching vocabulary, I introduce words I think students may have seen before but in some other context and words which I think students have not encountered before. I try not to overwhelm students with too many words, and I try to introduce the words in context, not in isolation. I teach the new words before reading the story and test students on the words after the story. Knowing the story's vocabulary before reading helps the students feel more comfortable with the whole reading experience and takes some of the frustration out of it.

Personalizing the Themes

In the prereading phase, I introduce some tangible article of my own or relate one of my experiences. Reading a piece of my own writing is more effective than sharing the story orally because then the students see that I am a writer too and that writing is nothing to fear or to be embarrassed about. I use these methods in order to suggest the story's theme. For "Everyday Use" I brought in two heirlooms of my own. I explained that heirlooms don't have to be expensive. Their main function is to connect us in a personal way with the people they represent.

My father was a traveling sales representative who seemed to have some needs that could not be fulfilled at home, so he wandered off eventually, leaving us to work out our circumstances. My mother had a second shift job as a cashier at a supermarket. When I wanted to see her, I had to stand in line at the store, and then we could only communicate as long as the customers were not annoyed. Our relationship continued like that for most of my high school years. My need for a male role model didn't go away, so I attached myself to the memory of my grandfather. The thing I miss most about him is the joy he brought to us and to everyone and everything he did. He spent most of his adult life in the Philippines and India, teaching and presiding over Leonard Theological Institute. I had an academic hood worn by my grandfather when he received a master's degree from Northwestern University. When I showed this to my class, I explained that the purple inside the hood represented the university granting the degree, and that the white trim on the outside of the hood rep-

resented the discipline grandfather studied, which was applied science. The hood has some significance for me because I established goals in my life centered on similar accomplishments. I would like to build a frame for the hood and hang it in my classroom along with other personal artifacts.

Since Walker's story has a quilt as its central object, I brought in two quilts. One, made by my great-grandmother, was on my crib as an infant. The other, made by my mother, was a present given to me when I returned from my enlistment in the navy. I made two West Pacific cruises on the USS Constellation toward the end of the Vietnam War. When my mother gave the quilt to me one Christmas, she said she made it as a way to stay connected while I was gone. The two quilts symbolize the great love given by the women in my life. I think about the legacy of women as it runs through my wife and to my children. The presence of these objects helps my students relate to the story in a very tangible way. Children especially like to immerse their senses in learning. Furthermore, I suggest students bring in and share items of their own. These "heirloom" articles can stimulate interaction and communication.

Using Free Writing to Explore Themes

Following the presentation of the articles, I ask for writing on one of the story's themes, so the readers approach the work with a preconditioned mind set which, in turn, encourages them to focus. To prepare for "Everyday Use," I asked for free writing on any one of the following:

1. What is an "heirloom," and do you have any?
2. What is a "sibling rivalry?" Tell about it.
3. What is "culture clash," and can you think of any examples?
4. What ideas for writing on topics similar to those I have suggested do you have? Write what you want.

The choosing of one's own topic for free writing facilitates reading in a personal way. The reader will focus on the text related to the theme he/she wrote about in prewriting, and will also notice more details related to the themes not selected simply because attention was drawn to them prior to the reading experience. Again, I set up a personal encounter for students which will stimulate a connection between themselves and the story.

After the free writing time is up, the students share their work with a partner. I tell the students to avoid value judgments and criticism in their response to the free writing. I tell them to simply underline any unique words, phrases, or ideas they find. My hope is that this experience will help them relate to one another in terms of our shared endeavor, the story. The discussion often leads to

storytelling beyond the scope of the free writing. When I sense that the students have said about all they are going to say to one another in pairs, I ask them to turn their attention to a larger discussion with the rest of us. Ideas seem to multiply like loaves and fishes, and, if all goes well, we have generated some excitement and anticipation about what is going to happen in our new friend, Alice Walker's, story.

Encouraging Engagement with Reading Logs

Now we read. Although recursive just like in writing, our prereading is completed. While we read, we take an active approach by keeping a reader's log. Good reading has nothing really to do with calling out words. Reading is an activity of the mind, not an oral exercise. As teachers we need to promote reading and writing in concert, simultaneously. Reading must be done with a writing tool in hand. The reader's log can have many different kinds of responses in it. I suggest as little as possible about the kinds of responses that the logs may contain. Kids are great imitators, and I believe the more models we offer, the less likely they are to be original. I do offer information from our text book *Elements of Literature* by Holt, Rinehart, and Winston about active strategies. Reading theorists tell us that we respond to what we read in possibly six different ways:

1. We connect our prior knowledge and experiences to what we read.
2. We raise questions.
3. We make predictions.
4. We interpret literature differently based on our roles and experiences.
5. We can extend stories into the real world. We see how the scenarios could happen to us or to real people.
6. We challenge authors. We think of other possibilities for the stories.

The choices in the list are merely descriptions of various means to respond to literature. Readers use them individually or in combinations. I tell readers not to worry about whether their responses are "correct" according to the list. The list is only a suggestion, a starting block. Just respond, I tell them. There are many ways to do it. Put it in the readers' log.

After the Reading

Eventually, the reader is going to get to the last word in the story; however, the experience of the story has not been finished. Perhaps it has just begun. Reading causes us to challenge our values and to change our lives. At this point teachers have to discover, with students, the impact the story has had. Post-reading activities and projects bring literature's message home to students in a manner which makes the message stick to the surface of the subconscious.

Walker's story lends itself to recalling oral histories. Students could write one of the many stories they were told by family members. For example, my father-in-law was in the largest naval battle in history, the Battle of Leyte Gulf. He tells of how he and his twin brother managed to stay together by lashing a rope around their waists before jumping from the flight deck of the sinking USS *Intrepid*. Another great follow-up to the story would be to write of the legacy of women in our own lives. Many of our mothers and grandmothers showed amazing determination and courage in the face of difficulty to keep a family together. Lots of families have remained intact in spite of the fact that they were abandoned by men. These are just two of more than a dozen possibilities for post-reading. Acting out scenes from stories helps readers internalize the characters and their conflicts and dilemmas. Don't let the story simply die. Use the story as a link.

In Conclusion

When kids connect to their reading and the authors we bring to their attention, our work becomes significant. We begin to answer the questions we have about who we are, and we come to terms with our place in space and time. I enjoy my students as people who have great ideas and experiences to share. I don't forget them, and they don't forget me. The literature we borrowed from authors both inside and outside of our classroom serves as a medium to draw us into relationships.

About the Author

Dirk Brines, a Red Cedar Writing Project participant, teaches at Farwell High School.