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PRACTICE

Telling Our Stories: Creating Authentic Narratives of Home

JANET NEYER

When I moved from the suburbs of Detroit to northern Michigan twenty-two years ago, I wondered if I was moving to the frontier. Here was a land of hills, lakes, and dirt roads that stood in stark contrast to the land of concrete, shopping malls, and four-lane expressways from which I had arrived. Initially, to calm my sense of displacement, I told myself that students were the same everywhere, and that the principles that had served me in Metro Detroit would be equally effective here.

As the years have flown by, that has been true in many ways. Students here, as in every community, deserve passionate educators who engage them, connect with them, and deliver rigorous curriculum. As I have grown to call northern Michigan home, though, I have come to appreciate that students here have unique perspectives and experiences that should be validated in our classrooms. As we implement the Common Core State Standards, we can be assured that all students in Michigan will have a comprehensive rigorous curriculum, but as teachers, it is incumbent on us to engage students where they live, and thereby honor their experiences. A regional narrative gives students the opportunity to practice the essential skills of narrative writing from the CCSS while connecting with something inherently relevant—home.

In my junior classes, our preparation for writing a place-based narrative

begins with mentor texts, both professional and amateur. Students read works such as Bret Harte's "The Outcasts of Poker Flat," Ernest Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River," Willa Cather's "The Sculptor's Funeral," and Williams Forrest's "Plainswoman" with an eye toward what makes these stories specific to a region. Together, we chart details, like dialect, customs, beliefs, geography, and people. Students begin to recognize the role of authorial intent in establishing a sense of place, and that intent later transfers to the choices they make in writing their own narratives.

When we shift from the professionals to the amateurs, though, students get excited about their own stories. Over the years, I have saved some of the most moving, hilarious, suspenseful, and genuine narratives from my former students. For a day, I read aloud stories of Cadillac students—tales about fathers setting up squirrel blinds in their homes, about waterskiing just as the ice on the lake has given way, about bagging the first buck, about two-tracking through muddy trails in remote places, about watching a snowmobile break through the ice and sink to the bottom of the lake, or about the Dogman, our own northern Michigan legend. These are the stories that my students identify with; they embody our home with its dialect, its geography and customs, its people, and all of our quirks. They recognize themselves and one another in these stories. To complement all of

these student narratives, I always read my own story to them as well. I was a transplant to northern Michigan from the Detroit suburbs many years ago, but to be clear, I still haven't changed my mind about how I would handle this occurrence today.

My Home Narrative

I suddenly bolted upright in my bed. One cat, Arthur, was sitting at the end of the bed in what I call his chicken position, four paws tucked securely under him like a chicken sitting on its eggs. He had a strange look of anxiety in his eyes. I did not see Lancelot, my second cat, in the room.

Why was I awake? The digits of my clock flashed a red 4:23 at me. Perhaps I had had a nightmare and awakened suddenly. Then I heard it.

"Chirp. Chirp. Squeak."

"What was that?" I thought to myself. I reached for the lamp on the nightstand and squinted when the light flooded the room. I could just make out Lancelot sitting in the hallway, staring intently at what I thought was a sock. Until it moved.

The chirping intensified. And what I now realized was a bat lifted a foot or so off the ground. Lance immediately leapt into the air and threw it back to the floor with his paws.

I pulled my heavy down comforter, which previously had made me feel warm and secure in Cadillac winters,

over my head and screamed for at least thirty seconds. All the while, the bat continued its noises. Then it occurred to me that I live alone, so all the screaming in the world was not going to bring help. I peeked out from the covers. The bat was on the floor, hopping toward my bedroom door. I pulled the blanket back over my head.

I had heard local residents talking about bat problems before. What was it they did to get rid of bats? I couldn't remember. But I did remember, suddenly, that my dad had told a story of a bat in his rural home when he was young. I reached toward the night table again, which brought about more intense chirping as the bat flopped from the hallway into my bedroom.

Reminding myself that it was nearly 4:30 in the morning, I hit speed-dial, and my mom answered.

"What happened? What's wrong?" she asked.

"There's a bat in my room." I peeked out from the covers again and saw that Lance was poking at the bat with his paw.

"Lance! No, Lance. Mom, Lance is playing with it. What do I do? What do I do? Can I talk to Dad?"

"He's out of town on a business trip." I had known that earlier in the day, but in my panic, I had forgotten.

"Get a tennis racket," my mom said.

"I don't have one."

"How 'bout a broom?"

"It's in the basement and I can't even get out of my room. I am too afraid to leave the bed." There was a pause in the chirping, so I peeked out again. Lance and the bat were locked face to face, as if in a stare down. They were now on the opposite side of the room, away from the door. If I made a

break for it right now, I thought, I could make it out of the room.

"Mom, hold on. I'm going to try getting away from the bat." Using every bit of courage in me, I leapt out of bed and ran to the door. I fully expected to feel a thump on my back as the killer bat came after me. Amidst more chirping and bat-prodding from Lance, I returned to my mother on the phone.

"OK. I'm out of the room," I said as I danced from one foot to the other. The thought of rabies had entered my mind, and with each passing moment, I became more afraid for Lance. Who knows how long he had been playing with the bat before it woke me.

"I just don't know what to tell you," my mom whispered, as if she too were in the hallway with me. "Can you throw a towel over it and carry it outside?"

That seemed impossible. I could not imagine getting close enough to throw a towel on the certainly blood-thirsty beast in the corner. Plus, there was a good chance the towel would cover Lance too. I did not want to risk a bat bite for either of us. My options seemed clear: live in harmony with the bat, leave the house, beat it senseless with something blunt and heavy, or call for help.

"Mom, I'll call you back," I said, hanging up. Then, city girl that I was, I called 9-1-1.

"Hello. Emergency 911 operator. Do you have an emergency?"

"Well, it's not really an emergency. It's just that I have a bat in my—" I shrieked into the phone as the bat was airborne again and headed toward me.

"OK Ma'am, just stay calm and I'll have a patrol car stop by."

It seemed like mere seconds passed and the patrol car was pulling up to my door. Two young police officers stepped out and came to the door where

I waited to let them in. One put on a pair of leather gloves and I showed him where the bat was. I ran into the living room expecting a struggle, possibly an airborne bat, and definite bloodshed, in all of which I wanted no part. But the officer simply walked into the room and picked the bat up off the floor with his gloved left hand. He came out of the room holding the bat, like a pet.

"Would you like to see him? He's really tiny."

"No," I responded in a voice that was a little louder than I had intended.

"Well, we'll take him outside and let him go."

"Thank you so much," I replied.

"You're not from around here, are you?"

The two officers walked to their patrol car. I could see them chuckling. I imagine they were saying things like, "Flatlander! Afraid of a bat," or maybe, "She must be from downstate." And I am sure they had a very amusing story to tell back at the station.

As for me, I did not sleep well the rest of the night. Arthur returned to his normal attitude and Lance sulked over the loss of his new toy. At school the next day, everyone laughed at me and couldn't believe that I had really called the police. But you can bet, the next time there is a bat in my house, I'll be dialing 9-1-1.

Teaching the Home Narrative

During the reading of my own story, I have to stop frequently to allow students to laugh—a response that I welcome. It will come as no shock that the young men in my classes, in particular, think the story is hysterical, but I value that as one of my greatest successes. Any story that hooks an adolescent male is a success. When I finish with

my story and those of my former students, the class is usually buzzing with remembrances from their years growing up here, memories that are the seeds for wonderful narratives. Many of my students have attended school together since kindergarten and share anecdotes from their younger years with others in the classroom. Inevitably, several students will call me over to tell me about the time a bat got into their house, a grandparent's house, the neighbor's house, and even a car one time, and we'll laugh together about whatever measures they took to get rid of it.

Reading mentor texts to the students takes a good portion of a class period, but the time is well worth it. Though students benefit from reading works from professionals, such as those from Harte and Hemingway, it is the stories from former students that truly spark their thinking. After our read-aloud, I always pass around the stories I have read as well as stories from other students that I have collected over the years. I want my students to notice how dialogue looks on the page, to see how the writers incorporate details of our region, and to realize that paragraphs of description interspersed with conversations help to propel the story along. These are techniques I ask them to use in their stories, so seeing them in the work of other student writers primes them for writing.

We also take time to brainstorm together. I share a list of possible topics on the projector and encourage students to talk with one another as I move through the room conferencing with students. When I ask if students have ideas for a story, very often I hear, "No. Nothing has ever happened to me." Since my goal is to validate their stories, I sit with them and ask about broken bones, birthdays, Christmas holidays,

hunting stories, sibling pranks, wildlife encounters, best friends, pets, and athletic contests.

Sometimes, as I am talking to a student struggling to find a topic, another student will chime in: "Remember that time you fell off the monkey bars at school and they called an ambulance?" Now, there's a story. When they need encouragement, I explain to students that it's not the size of the event, but the skill of the storyteller that creates a compelling narrative. After all, I could have just said to them, "A bat got into my house and I called the police to remove it," but it's the elements of suspense, dialogue, description, and even humor that transform an ordinary event into a story.

Once students have topics, we use a workshop approach in writing the narrative. Mini-lessons on techniques that will assist them in developing their narratives take place at the start of each hour. For instance, at the start of one class, we chart details about our region in the same manner that we charted regional details in the professional texts; students brainstorm specifics about our speech and colloquialisms, our customs and beliefs, the geographic appearance of our area, and the characteristics of people who live here. They use this chart as they write their narratives in order to incorporate regional details.

On another day, we do a mini-lesson on the essential skill of showing rather than telling in a story. Students play with one simple sentence and expand it into something powerful and descriptive with imagery, dialogue, figurative language, and active verbs. These techniques suit their narratives beautifully, so I ask them to use them in the process of writing their papers. Finally, I teach a mini-lesson on dialogue that explains the complexities of

paragraphing and punctuation but also encourages them to think about the effectiveness of dialogue tags and the arrangement of a conversation for the best effect. Armed with the tools of great storytellers, my students rise to the occasion and create memorable stories.

When it comes to the student papers, the influence of sharing my own story may mean I receive more stories about wildlife encounters than another teacher, but those rendezvous happen more frequently in northern Michigan as well. In the end, the students achieve the Common Core State Standards for narrative writing through a process of developing a real experience and learning how to engage readers with details, dialogue and pacing, but what's more rewarding is that I learn volumes about them from their narratives of home. Though many of their stories are humorous, others are heart-wrenching, compelling, and revealing of their lives and our community. This opportunity for students to tell their truth legitimizes their experiences and the place we call home.

Janet Neyer teaches juniors and seniors at Cadillac High School in English 11, AP English, and AP Psychology courses. She is also a teacher consultant with the Chippewa River Writing Project at Central Michigan University.

Appendix A. Regional Narrative Assignment Sheet.

Writing a Regional Narrative

Purpose: The purpose of this paper will be to write a realistic story from your life that takes place in Cadillac. Within your narrative, you must include references to our region, such as habits, customs, beliefs, speech and appearance.

Your Role: As the storyteller, you may add details to your story as you think they may have happened even if you cannot remember them exactly. You may also make your characters larger than life if it helps you to demonstrate our region. In terms of structure, make sure that your story has a clear beginning, middle and conclusion. We'll discuss some different approaches in class. Your narrative should be multi-paragraph.

Focus Correction Areas: For this paper, your FCAs are as follows. We will do lessons on each of these areas in class to prepare for the paper.

1. Using regional characteristics (including dialogue)
2. Showing rather than telling
3. Maintaining consistent tense

Also, edit for areas of correctness including sentence fragments, run-ons, capitalization, punctuation, and spelling.

Standards: In this unit you will learn to

- Analyze the impact of an author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story (RL.11-12.3).
- Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text contribute to structure, meaning and aesthetic impact (RL.11-12.5).
- Write a narrative to develop a real experience or event using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences (W.11-12.3).
- Engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation and its significance, establishing one or multiple point(s) of view, and introducing a narrator and/or characters; create a smooth progression of experiences or events (W.11-12.3a).
- Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters (W.11-12.3b).
- Use a variety of techniques to sequence events so that they build on one another to create a coherent whole and build toward a particular tone and outcome (W.11-12.3c).
- Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters (W.11-12.3d).
- Provide a conclusion that follows from and reflects on what is experienced, observed, or resolved over the course of the narrative (W.11-12.3e).