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PRACTICE

My Confession: How Talking about Mental Illness Helped my Students Grow

KATIE SLUITER

My hands shook as I gave my student's name at the check-in desk. Even though I had undergone years of outpatient therapy through Pine Rest, a mental hospital in Grand Rapids, I had never been there to see anyone—especially a student—who had actually been admitted. I had no idea what to expect.

The woman behind the glass checked my I.D. and made sure I was on the very short list of allowed visitors. I had to show her the gifts I brought my student: a journal, a magnet with an encouraging quote, and a special pen. My student couldn't have the pen; it would be given to her when she was released. The journal's ribbon bookmark was also out of the question. It was all very surreal, and I felt like I was on some sort of TV show. I found myself looking for Nurse Ratched. Ken Kesey's 1962 novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* was my only point of reference for mental hospitals.

My student was called out to the very crowded visiting room. She was wearing sweats and no shoes—patients weren't allowed anything but slippers. She looked excited to see me. I was the only non-family member on the list of visitors her parents created.

For the next hour, we talked about her depression, what her goals and plans were, and how I could help support her once she went home. When security started to dismiss the visitors, we hugged and I promised to be back later in the week.

That was in February.

But this relationship started all the way back in September in a senior English class when I introduced a personal narrative unit. As I brought my four senior classes through the writing process and workshopped pieces with them, we read a variety of narratives, ranging eyewitness accounts of 9/11 to stories about becoming an amputee. We read harrowing personal experiences and we read heartfelt stories of people who changed the lives of the writer. And while we read, we wrote.

Students then wrote about their own experiences with life-changing events, people, and places. They “exploded small moments” in their lives and told their stories.

But something was missing. I could tell students were holding back. So I read each class a piece I was working on, tentatively titled “Falling into Darkness: What Depression Feels Like” about my own never-ending battle with the disease. The first hour I read it, I felt awkward sharing such a raw piece of who I am with my students. I am a pretty open teacher, but I had let the stigma of mental illness prevent me from sharing with my students. Now, in front of 25 silent adolescents, I was revealing a chink in the armor of my teacher persona. Would they lose respect for me? Would they feel that whatever they didn't like about my class could now be blamed on the fact that I am clinically “crazy”? Temporarily ignoring these questions, I read my piece:

My reality went wonky. I didn't want to do any of the fun things people suggested, but I did want to cry. I didn't want to be around anyone, but we were on vacation with my parents and both brothers and their families.

I started finding fault with everyone and everything they said and did. The more I tried to just hurry up and get over it and “be happy,” the worse it got. I tried to be positive and it made me more negative. I tried to see that they were just jokes and humor people were using, but I ended up taking offense even quicker.

I tried to tell myself all the questions were because my family was interested in me and wanted to make conversation, but I couldn't help feel like I was being judged and eye-rolled. I tried to “get over it” or “not worry about it” as was suggested when I would mention my stresses, but instead I felt unheard and more anxious.

I didn't expect to cry. But almost every hour I read it, my voice cracked and I had to fight tears. I think it was a combination of fear, shame, and hearing myself admit—out loud—that I wasn't perfect. I was definitely uncomfortable sharing, so I didn't expect the applause or the hugs or the tears from my students.

From that day on, my students' writing changed. Their discussions in class changed. Their relationship with me and with one another changed. An atmosphere of empathy and trust took over. They were much more honest, and they were open to making it better. Some were still reluctant to share with anyone but me, but most came around. Because of the delicate nature of the subject, I chose to have the students workshop silently using the English department netbooks. We did all drafting and revision in Google docs and shared with people who used the comment feature to respond.

Students wrote about dealing with a friend's suicide, their own thoughts of killing or injuring themselves, terminal illness in their families, people who saved their lives in one way or another, and many other topics. Letting them choose a few people (including me) whom they felt comfortable sharing with helped them be more open. Knowing they didn't have to read their pieces out loud—as many were unable to put their own voice to their narratives yet—also helped them be more authentic. I had four sections of seniors, and they weren't restricted to having their revision buddies be in their particular section. As we workshopped our writing, it was silent in the room with fierce bursts of typing here and there. There was a real honesty in teaching, in learning, and in writing and revising in my classroom.

Relationships Built on Trust

The constant flow of students to my classroom after school started around that same time. Most stopped in to say, "me too" or to ask what kind of meds I was on because they were on something similar. Some wanted to know how I coped and how I seemed so happy and able to function. Others confessed secrets about self-mutilation, attempted suicide, and stays in mental hospitals.

One student began regularly hanging out with me after school. Eventually, she revealed that she had experienced a significant traumatic event during her freshman year—and that she had never fully recovered. As a result, she was making all sorts of destructive decisions from her hurt and pain. Between another teacher she confided in, her parents, and me, we formed a triangle of love and vigilance around her.

Despite our watchfulness, her parents checked her into Pine Rest for a second stay in February, and this was where I visited her twice.

Mental Illness and Trauma in YA Literature

Around the same time, I was reworking my curriculum for the end of senior English. The other senior classes would be reading *Frankenstein* and *1984*, but I knew my students needed something more related to their lives. Something they could really discuss. Something they would actually read.

I thought over our year together, and the main theme that emerged was coping with trauma, often in the form of mental illness. At the same time, I was also researching how to incorporate choice in order to get students to read more and read better. With Title I funds, I ordered six titles for my students to choose from and create book clubs like those suggested by Daniels & Steineke (2004): *The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green, which deals with terminal illness and depression; *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky, which features characters suffering from depression and recovering from trauma; *It's Kind of a Funny Story* by Ned Vizzini, about a teen who checks himself into the hospital after almost committing suicide; *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie, in which the main character deals with death in the family; *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon, in which a teenager with autism uncovers startling truths about his family; and the adult novel *Mudbound* by Hillary Jordan, which shows the effects of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Working with our school's media specialist, I allowed students to choose from these six titles, and I separated them into book clubs for discussion purposes. For four weeks, book clubs discussed the books, including characters, themes, quotes, and questions they had while reading. Eventually, their questions and discussions led them through an inquiry-based research project that was the capstone of their senior English class.

Each book club was a fully functioning, autonomous unit that created its own social contract to guide the interaction of its members. Students used the following questions to write their social contract: how do I want to be treated in book club? How do I think others want to be treated? What happens when someone breaks the contract? Each group member signed the contract and put it in their shared group binder, keeping it as a means to evaluate their group's effectiveness. Groups also worked to craft a workable

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reading schedule and to devise a plan for daily discussion. In addition, students in each group were responsible for keeping a list of questions they had while reading. The reading schedule, discussion plan, quote list, and question list were also stored in the group binder. The questions eventually led to each group's inquiry project that they presented to the class (Daniels & Daniels 2009).

Book clubs met three times a week for 30 minutes. While they met, I moved from group to group, spending at least five minutes conferencing with each group about their book. Since I had read each book, I would sometimes sit in and listen to the discussion. If there were comprehension questions, I helped them find answers. I also modeled how to ask questions as they read and talked together. There were many class periods that found us discussing until the bell rang, and I often heard students chatting about their books as they walked out the door. Groups even talked to other groups about their books, which meant some of my extra copies were frequently checked out.

Connecting Mental Wellness and Illness to Students' Lives

The week before graduation, my seniors presented their inquiry projects to the class. Almost every presentation focused on a mental illness/disorder (depression, anxiety, P.T.S.D.) or the effect that traumatic events have on someone's mental wellness. Students brought the year full circle by referencing their own personal narratives from first quarter. Some students shared their own experiences with treatment centers, medication, traumatic events, and suicide. The most powerful group was one that had read *It's Kind of a Funny Story*, in which the main character contemplates suicide and checks himself into the hospital after calling the suicide help line. My student who had spent time at Pine Rest was in this group, and for the first time, she spoke to her peers about her experience. She compared and contrasted what her stay was like to that of the protagonist in the book. The group gave information about signs to look for in friends and who to tell. They also shared a powerful video they found. The entire class was in tears as the bell rang. Everyone wanted to hug my student and tell their own story to her. I had to write passes for the entire class to their next classes because I didn't want to break up the moment.

From my perspective, the presentations were the most authentic projects most of my students had ever done. They were sharing information they researched or experienced

because it was important to them, and they wanted to educate their peers. Those in the audience were respectful, attentive, and asked good questions that led to powerful discussions that lingered after the bell rang, and even after graduation a week later.

My Own Risks and Rewards

I knew on that day back in September that I was taking a real risk sharing a piece of myself with my students, but I never imagined that it would shape the rest of the curriculum for the school year. Because I made myself open to my students, incorporated choice in their reading selections, and gave them opportunities for authentic research and presentation, my students succeeded in ways that many may not have experienced before, in English class or elsewhere.

For me, it was my most successful year of teaching in my twelve-year career. Not only did I hit the standards, but I also met students where they were and I focused their learning back on themselves. I believe for many, their senior year in English class will be an experience that sticks with them for a long time.

I know that without my modeling of narrative writing based on my own mental health experience, this honesty would never have happened in my class. By giving my students permission to become vulnerable too, I also showed them a voice they didn't know they had. By reading their words, I realized what sort of literature and discussion they needed over what was traditionally taught. Students learned empathy and how to listen to others by reading the experiences of others as well as reading novels about traumatic events. For them, mental illness now has a real face, and is not just an abstract topic in a current events class. We all have a story, but someone had to be the first to share.

Information related to students is included here with permission.

References

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