



2021

“Can I Write About What Happened To Me?”: A Narrative Inquiry into the Audience and Purpose of Students’ and Their Teachers’ Writing in an Age of Accountability and Unrest

Kate Sjostrom
University of Illinois at Chicago, katesjostrom@uic.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/wte>



Part of the Creative Writing Commons, Curriculum and Instruction Commons, Language and Literacy Education Commons, Rhetoric and Composition Commons, and the Secondary Education and Teaching Commons

Recommended Citation

Sjostrom, Kate (2021) “Can I Write About What Happened To Me?”: A Narrative Inquiry into the Audience and Purpose of Students’ and Their Teachers’ Writing in an Age of Accountability and Unrest,” *Teaching/Writing: The Journal of Writing Teacher Education*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/wte/vol10/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Teaching/Writing: The Journal of Writing Teacher Education by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



“Can I Write About What Happened To Me?”: A Narrative Inquiry into the Audience and Purpose of Students’ and Their Teachers’ Writing in an Age of Accountability and Unrest

Kate Sjostrom, *University of Illinois at Chicago*

The narrative itself is a form of interpretation, analyzing, and finding meaning, and...it becomes the first step in locating the tensions and unspoken silences in one’s life.

—Joy S. Ritchie and David E. Wilson,
Teacher Narrative as Critical Inquiry: Rewriting the Script

On a Chicago summer night when Tom McNamee was 20 years old, he floated down Michigan Avenue with a girl who was not quite his girl. But that evening, he thought she was his, and the Magnificent Mile sparkled as they made their way from Gino’s East south towards the river and talked about the future. Tom was floating through *life*, he told the girl, unsure of what to major in, unsure of what he wanted to do after college. People had told him he was a good writer, but what could he do with that? He wanted to charge into the world, but how?

A taxi horn blared as if to urge Tom on, and Tom, energized, veered across a plaza toward the grand stone of the Wrigley Building which was all lit up, shining against the purple-black sky like Oz. The girl followed, confused by the change in course, and caught up to Tom just as he turned around to face her. Framed by a golden doorway, Tom gestured behind him, speaking more softly but even more urgently. “Maybe I could work for a newspaper. If I was a journalist, I could go up to that guy and ask him how he got here. I could ask him anything I want to know.”

As he stood there, shielding the girl who wasn’t really his girl from the mysterious bum sleeping in the golden doorway, Tom realized how much he wanted to know. And he started to think of journalism as a way to find out, as a

conscious choice to be part of the world. His eyes looked from the girl to the Michigan Avenue bridge, then followed the river's path to the vast blank canvas of lake and the broad sky above.

Sameea talks to strangers and thinks more people should. She's not a journalist. She's her mother's daughter. Both women "make conversation with random people." Though Sameea suspects many would consider their behavior "weird," she finds the "exchange" of words between strangers "a beautiful thing," insisting that the people to whom she talks are "not *strangers*; they're human beings with stories and thoughts."

Sameea chose high school English teaching as a career in part because in a classroom she is *supposed* to talk to and listen to people she wouldn't otherwise know: "As much as I would like to walk up to every other person down the road and talk to them, there's only so much I can do that in normal life, because people have other things going on. When I'm in a classroom, though, and I'm teaching, that is accepted. That's why they're there. They're there to listen and *I'm* there to listen." Because Sameea can "present and listen in a way that everyday existing limits," she feels "*more* like herself" when she's teaching.

In *Teaching Selves*, Jane Danielewicz (2001), drawing on Jenkins (1996), suggests that "teaching 'selves'" result from the interaction of many internal and external conditions and factors, such as "family patterns, educational histories, personal character traits, national and regional affiliations, social class background, and a lifetime of social encounters"—including those with schools of education and field sites (pp. 36-7). Put another way, Danielewicz sees prospective teachers as developing their professional identities "from the inside out and from the outside in" (p. 11).

I am thinking of Sameea, my English Education student, as Tom McNamee tells his story of a long-ago night on Michigan Avenue to a group of middle-schoolers at the Illinois Writing Project's Writing Palooza. I imagine her across the street from Tom and his almost-girl, sitting on the edge of a planter in Pioneer Court, in front of the Equitable Building—only it's day-bright and decades later, and she's talking to an elderly man about his granddaughter, the girl racing from them toward a seagull scavenging commuters' dropped crumbs. Both Sameea and Tom are out in the wide world.

Of course, right now, Sameea is probably doing homework and Tom is here, speaking as Editorial Page Editor of the Chicago Sun-Times to aspiring adolescent

writers. He is trying to distinguish between the kind of writing the kids will do in his session—journalistic writing that reaches outward—and more personal writing. I am keenly aware that the “inward” writing he describes is all I ever do if I ever do write, but I comfort myself that I am here, if only as an observer. I am here: forcing myself to reach outward, trying on ways to charge into the world as a writer and writer educator. When Tom is done presenting, I make myself go up to him and talk.

It’s easier to talk than listen in a classroom. When Sameea began my Writing Methods course, she was eager to be more open-eared than the high school teachers she’d had. In particular, she wanted to be nothing like her journalism teacher, the woman who had shouted at Sameea in front of the whole class after reading the first draft of a letter Sameea had composed to the editor of the local paper.

The newspaper had run an article ranking area schools by test scores, making special note of those schools that had experienced what Sameea remembers as a “drastic decrease in performance.” Sameea’s high school was one of those schools. Armed with ideas from her sociology elective, Sameea connected her school’s “drastic decrease” to the recent and drastic *increase* in students from underprivileged backgrounds. It made sense to Sameea that these students’ test scores were low; “students coming from underprivileged backgrounds *will* struggle in school.” What did not make sense to her was that the school’s newfound diversity garnered no positive press. Whereas she “used to be one of the only ethnic minorities in the entire school,” there were now “students from many backgrounds—including immigrants, refugees, and teens relocated to the suburbs from the poorest neighborhoods [of the city]—but it was not being embraced.” In the first draft of her letter to the editor, Sameea asked, “Why are we not celebrating the new diversity and working towards a better future as an integrated community? Why isn’t ‘success’ measured as the amount of dynamic diversity in a school?”

And then came the shouting. Sameea’s journalism teacher, in front of all her students, “howled” at Sameea: “This is the most offensive thing I ever read!” Next, Sameea remembers, the teacher wrote on Sameea’s paper, with her “big red pen...in colossal letters”: “RACIST!” Though her teacher had likely misinterpreted her claim that the school’s new minority students “*will* struggle” as a statement of minority students’ inevitable failure, rather than as an indictment of the systems that had failed those students, that “slap” of a word made Sameea feel “dejected.” She made only a few, small edits to the letter to please her teacher before submitting it to the community paper.

Sameea shared this story with her writing group in the methods course—a public promise to be less like her journalism teacher and more like the sociology instructor who later called Sameea to her at the beginning of class to praise

Sameea's first printed piece. Spread across the teacher's desk was an open newspaper, and there was Sameea's letter to the editor for all to see. That day, Sameea first knew, "My thoughts *are* valid, and conveying them through writing is my purpose." The newspaper published her letter online, too, and, in the comments section, a dialogue started about "the flaws in the education system."

Just weeks after sharing this story with her peers, Sameea had a chance to start another dialogue: she led her first (albeit practice) writing conference. Afterwards, she proudly told me that she "maintained a positivity throughout." Still, she found herself "speaking the majority of the time." She reflected: "I could have given the writer more of an opportunity to speak and to ask me questions. For some reason," she said, "the teacher feels the need to be the one keeping the control."

During that Writing Methods course, Sameea agreed to be a participant in my research study on writing teacher identity development. She comes to my office after each semester and we write together about memorable classroom moments (as students, observers, or teachers) and talk about them and more. When I review the transcripts of our conversations, I can't help but compare our blocks of text. Am I talking too much? Am I talking enough?

In her article, "Toward Explaining the Transformative Power of Talk about, around, and for Writing" (2012), Beth Godbee describes how collaborative writing talk can "challenge asymmetrical power relations in the moment and over time" and how the resultant relationship-building can lead to heightened "critical consciousness" and deepened, or even new, "commitments" (p. 181). Godbee comes to her conclusions after observing in a university writing center and offers a case study of Kim (tutor) and Susan (student) to illustrate her findings. As Kim and Susan discuss Susan's writing, they "share troubles" both academic and personal. In doing so, they "raise awareness of issues that matter," especially in relation to issues motivating Susan's writing, as they continuously "'unpack'" ideas, "dig deeper," and "refuse to accept easy answers." Kim and Susan "strengthen their individual commitments," but as they tell stories that "mirror each other," they also "more easily come to care about the other's lived experience and the values underlying the research and writing they review on an ongoing basis." In the process, power relations are "redistributed"; Kim and Susan work *together* (p. 190).

When I first read Godbee's article, I found it benign and affirming—proof of what was obvious but sometimes ignored: sharing and talking about writing builds relationships and commitment. When I re-read it, however, what always happens when one re-reads did. Words and ideas that hadn't caught my attention the first time around stood out from those around them, rose off the page in

illuminated bas-relief: “acting in the world,” “concrete changes both in writers’ personal lives...and in their surrounding communities” (p. 190). And soon, these words lost the hazy glow of promise and began to poke at me like so many thistles. Kim and Susan hadn’t just deepened their relationship and commitments. With Kim’s help, Susan retook and passed her doctoral preliminary exams, and armed with knowledge from Susan’s doctoral project, Kim took on an open adoption. Could Sameea and I similarly venture out? Deepened relationships and commitments weren’t enough. Sameea and I needed to *act*. We needed to create *change*.

After Tom McNamee’s session, I head to one on writing soap box speeches. The focus is civic engagement, and as I sneak into the classroom and behind a camera crew and some parents, the presenter is already helping the middle schoolers articulate changes they would like to see in their school communities. One girl thinks there’s too much testing, another too much bullying, another not enough money for after-school sports. The presenter is a skilled teacher, leading the kids through a series of scaffolded activities to compose—and even revise—calls to action. Still, when students read out their 30-second products, I cannot help but think of the implications of the *soap box*; their words are *impromptu*, making use only of what is at hand: a soap crate from who-knows-where. There has been no time for research on underlying causes, activists’ efforts, target audiences.

The presenter passes around a flyer, and I am impressed by the programs offered by the organization she represents. Through them, young people can join civic committees, get internships. Here and now, though, I see the speeches students gave just minutes ago forming a cloud above our heads: all those attempts at pathos, logos, and ethos going nowhere, swirling in a stratus of buzzing words. I imagine such a haze looming just below the drop-ceiling and fluorescent lights in *my* classroom, as I wonder if my attempts at providing authentic audiences for my students’ writing have really opened any windows or doors. Then, I imagine words trapped in the upper atmospheres of classrooms down the hall, down the street, across town, across the state, until my head begins to hum with the static of impotent voices.

I am startled from the building drone by a big voice coming from a girl in the front of the classroom. She is a special guest—last year’s city-wide soap box speech champ—and all energy. She is telling the story of how she rewrote her speech for the new audience at nationals, how she learned to still her always active hands while she performed. In this moment, though, those hands are alive, birds flying around her head as she describes the happy shock of finding out at nationals that work already *was* being done around her issue, that others *were* concerned

about teens' social and emotional health in schools. She'd been approached after the competition by some like-minded folks and now felt part of the conversation.

I try to let this silver lining shine a minute before shadowing it with my waxing criticism: How did she get all the way to nationals without researching the history of her issue? Yes, when she got there, she learned and networked, but she was only *one* of a major metropolis of kids to get there.

And even she is stuck talking to herself. As the session ends with a video of her winning performance, she retreats to the back of the room where she lip syncs her speech, talking to no one at all.

A few meetings ago, Sameea told me she was worried about the social-emotional health of Tenai, a girl she teaches in a remedial weekend program. Tenai talks to no one and “hardly smiles,” though as a middle-schooler she used to be “bubbly” and “sweet,” a “respectful” and eager student, a hugger. These days, she looks “bored” always, sometimes “disgust[ed]” or “sad.” Sameea has worked with Tenai for a few years now and used to teach her brother, Tevari, too, so on a recent Saturday she tried to draw Tenai out of her quiet by asking about him. She “instantly regret[ed] it.” Tenai’s face became “even more swallowed up” and she could manage only a “monotone voice” as she told Sameea that her brother, now in high school, skips class and was just suspended for having drugs.

This moment, Sameea told me, was when she “internalized what [she’s] been learning all these years about ‘the system.’” She *felt* it, cold and machine-like. Its gears grind up “zeal for learning,” make gravel of “creativity.” The system is not a human thing. As proof, there was Tenai before her, colder, a blank face. Just as Tevari, also once “bright and enthusiastic,” had become “that kid,” that statistic. It takes human warmth to counter the system, it takes “writ[ing] about and *do[ing]* something that’s meaningful” for teacher and student “both.”

“You know what I mean?” Sameea asked me.

The scariest thing, she lowered her voice to tell me, is that she can see how it happens, how “when you’re working under a school system and you’re working with administration and you’re working with state standards and you’re working with national standards...teaching is slowly, slowly becoming this separate entity of just work.” Teachers become not the mentors Tevari needed; they become automatons.

And I saw it, saw Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, which I had read for my graduate exams, come to life: Sameea as a factory worker sending students, one indistinguishable from the other, down the line. She is alienated by this “estranged labor,” alienated even from “her own body, as well as...[her] spiritual aspect, [her] human aspect” (Marx p. 32).

But not yet. Sitting in front of me, red lipstick matching her bright headscarf, Sameea began to recount the ways she was trying to resist: “[Because] I have a fear of becoming this mechanical robot, I think I try—I always have to keep grounding myself in that humanness, so I think I haven't quite gone too far away. ...I still am very much present with my students. I have to ask them how they're doing. I have to talk to them. You know, during the home room periods, some classes do [one] minute, timed tests and I'm like, No, we're just going to hang out and chill and talk, you know? I don't want to make them feel like they're in a prison.”

Still, Sameea mourned her curriculum that once was: “What it used to be was, you know, we would write movie reviews and we would write—like, we had a spoken word unit, and those things are now not there. They're not there. We don't have the time for it, cuz there're *five weeks*, right? Five Saturdays—and within those five Saturdays *my* job is to make sure that their pre-assessments and their post-assessments show some kind of an improvement. Or that in their regular schools their grades are going up from C's and D's to hopefully B's and C's—at *least*. And what the [program director] has said on occasion is that these things *are* happening and that the program *is* helping them and their grades are improving significantly, so I feel like if I were to just kind of come down and do the fun things that *I* like to do, I would be maybe jeopardizing that. I *try* my best, but sometimes it's like you have to prioritize—you don't *have* to but *I* feel like I have to prioritize making sure that every student in my class knows where to put a comma.”

After soap box speeches, it is across the hall to a session on spoken word. In the program, the presenter is labeled a “teaching artist,” a title I at first assume must be one given to teachers who excel at their teaching craft—but given by whom, I wonder, and why haven't I heard of it? When I learn that it is the name for artists—poets, painters, musicians—who work with area schools, I am not sure of which version I am more jealous; I want to be considered an artist of teaching *and* an artist, period. I try to stop constructing a soap box in my brain, try to stop myself from starting an old harangue against the view of teaching-as-technocracy.

But I have no chance to get worked up, because the teaching artist is immediately enchanting. His name is Elijah, and he is a tall, slender man—a young man but agelessly so, could be 25 or 35. He enunciates, he intones, his voice somehow always soft. And he has got style—tailored slacks, a tucked in fine shirt under a high, v-neck sweater. He is confident. He is smart. I can tell he knows composition theory, that he's walked the walk as he talks a room full of strangers through free-writing, through poem generation.

We are willing students; we play along. And he takes us to unexpected, artful places with language. Sure, there are some naturals here, like the girl with the

bouquet of hair atop her head who is already planting poem seeds with ease: honeysuckle this, tangerine that. But even those less confident cannot help—under his tutelage—but find some word surprise.

He is unfailingly thankful for our words, snapping when they're moving, honoring the mysterious beauty of even the unclear. When one girl takes as her subject a Disney film, he doesn't snap but is still thankful, respectful of her bravery in sharing.

When it is time for a final free-write, I cannot help but write about the poetry workshop I used to run for a creative writing elective when I was a high school teacher. I write about trying to be as encouraging as Elijah but being unable to withhold even the smallest of suggestions, for there were grades to defend, contests to enter, a prestigious program's legacy to uphold. I cannot help but write about Eddy, the boy who on the last day of class said he knew I didn't really like his writing, despite my having alternated compliments with suggestions as I wrote in pencil on all of his poems. I realize that I never talked one-on-one with him about his work and wonder if that would have made a difference. I am pretty sure so. Then, to soften the blow of the memory of Eddy, I think of all those students with whom I did get close, of the post-graduation literary salon I held in my living room. But I cannot shake Eddy, so as Elijah is thanking us for sharing our words and our selves with him, I speed-scribble about how my writing perfectionism has probably robbed not only my students but also me of some serendipity, of some word- and image-gifts. And as I close my notebook, I wonder if I even know how to *just* word-play. There's never been time for just word-play.

And yet we've just played for an hour and fifteen minutes. The world of middle schools—these are young adolescents after all—must be different. And so I catch up to ask a teacher accompanying her students, but she tells me no: "It's all argumentative writing and paragraph graphic organizers there now, too. But I sneak the personal and creative writing in here and there. I've got to."

Back in my writing methods course, I snuck in a narrative writing exercise during our unit on literary analysis. I was trying to show Sameea and her classmates one way we can invite students' stories even as we study literature. The exercise, adapted from the "Text Explosion" taught at Bard College's Institute for Writing and Thinking, was this: As I read aloud an early passage of John Gardner's *Grendel*, the story of Beowulf told from the eyes of the "monster," I asked students to circle any images or phrases that called to them—for any reason or even for no discernible one. Then, I asked students to pick one phrase or image, write it on their own paper, and then use those words as the beginning of a short, first-person, non-fiction narrative or free-write. When I slowly re-read the passage aloud, each student was to interrupt me when I'd read her chosen phrase, repeat it, then read her narrative.

When she was done, I continued with the passage until I was interrupted again. By the time I'd finished, we'd told a collective story, one that went in many directions but was grounded in Gardner's imagery and diction: "so it goes with me age by age," "the deadly progression of moon and stars," "spinning a web of words," "fists clenched against my lack of will," "the cold mechanics of the stars," "space hurls outward," "the cold night air is reality at last: indifferent to me," "playing cat and mouse with the universe" (p. 8–10).

Of course, Gardner wasn't just playing with images, I told my students; he was communicating through them. They reflected his protagonist's beliefs and emotions—as did *our* stories which, born of Grendel's words, echoed his existential angst. And as we charted our chosen phrases, the ideas around which they orbited came into sharper focus. The stars weren't "cold" because it was a chilly night; rather, Grendel felt the heavens had no feeling for him. Indeed, he suspected the heavens might not house anyone at all. The real power rested with the spinner of words, the Shaper. A sort of press secretary for the king, this Shaper had spun quite a tale about the "villain" Grendel. All Grendel could do was try to catch us in the web of his own version of events.

When we wrote ourselves into Grendel's story, we were able both to empathize with him and to see his word-web for what it was: a persuasive narrative. Sameea, in particular, became especially taken by Gardner's book, finding in it a language for talking about the messages spinning around her, messages coming from media, politicians, school districts. She began talking about the importance of disrupting dominant narratives, as Grendel had done, like ones that said test scores mattered more than diversity. She had always advocated for the importance of talking to and listening to others, and now she had a language for explaining why such conversation could be so powerful: an individual's story could bore a hole in the wall of accepted narrative. Many stories might bring that wall down. And yet there were commas to place in just the right spaces: bits of mortar between the bricks or not?

When Sameea talks of disrupting dominant narratives, I cannot help but think of Harvard historian Jill Lepore's *New Yorker* article "The Disruption Machine" (2016), which has attuned me to the popularity of "disruption," if of a different kind than Sameea is after. In it, Lepore describes how the idea of "disruptive innovation," an idea born in business schools, is so pervasive that it has made its way into "arenas whose values and goals are remote from the values and goals of business," arenas such as public schools. Ever since Clayton M. Christensen introduced the concept in his 1997 book *The Innovator's Dilemma*, Lepore says, "everyone is either disrupting or being disrupted." And ever since I've read Lepore's article, I do, in fact, see references to disruption everywhere—in the

manner that I have only noticed the many Toyotas in my neighborhood since I bought one. Open an email from the National Council of Teachers of English and what do I see? The text of a recent conference speech by Joyce Locke Carter that begins, “Knowing I was speaking about disruption, I thought ‘what’s more disruptive than playing punk music for an academic talk?’ So I played punk for you. I’ll play some more punk for you after the talk.”

Before I read Lepore’s article, Locke Carter’s call for “disruption” in her field (composition/writing education) likely would not have registered as all that different from the many calls for change to be heard at a conference. But when paired with “innovation,” as it is in Locke Carter’s talk and many, many other places these days, disruption brings with it the distinct baggage of the competitive marketplace. When Sameea says she wants to disrupt dominant schooling narratives, she is *not* using “disruption” in the sense Christensen uses it when he advocates disruptive innovations in his later book *Disrupting Class* (co-authored with Curtis W. Johnson and Michael B. Horn, 2008). Per Christensen, “disruptive innovations take root...in new plane[s] of competition—where the very definition of what constitutes quality, and therefore what improvement means, is *different* from what quality and improvement meant” (Christensen, Johnson, and Horn, 2008, p. 47). Christensen advocates against the “monolithic batch mode system where all students are taught the same things on the same day in the same way” and for a “modular system” through which we can “educate children in customized ways” using computers (p. 225). Because of its affordability, computer-based customization disrupts a system that could never afford sufficiently personalized instruction—not since the one-room schoolhouses of the early 1800’s, when the teacher-to-pupil ratio was manageable. Problem is, suggests Lepore, that while schools “have revenues and expenses and infrastructures...they aren’t industries in the same way that manufacturers of hard-disk drives or truck engines or drygoods are industries.” Indeed, “people aren’t disk drives.”

Disruption can *feel* very human: punk rockers knocking against the system. And I have no doubt some knocking needs doing. But while Christensen’s language of customization implies an understanding that people aren’t disk drives, I find it suspect that he finds it *unnecessary* to study students and schools to make recommendations about them. He writes:

Most books on the topic of improving schools have reached their conclusions by studying schools. In contrast, our field of scholarship is innovation. Our approach in researching and writing this book has been to stand *outside* the public education industry and put our innovation research on almost like a set of lenses to examine the industry’s problems from this different perspective. (p. 6)

This outside stance makes unbelievable and even comical the vignettes with which Christensen and his co-authors begin each chapter, as in the final chapter when they go to pains to paint their model as having a humanity absent in the assembly-line education to which they say we've become accustomed: student "Vanessa" excitedly shows student "Tim" a computer "program she's found that helps her read music," and teacher "Rob" sees teacher "Maria," in the next classroom, "leaning over his own daughter, Sarah, pointing at the screen," while thinking about recommending virtual soccer practice to the assistant coach, who happens also to be his father (p. 224). This bonded, collaborative family of learners does not clearly follow from the preceding couple hundred pages, pages that compare schools to computer companies and raise an alarm at the high percentage of non-Americans in America's tech industry. For though Christensen distinguishes his educational model from the current one, which he describes as "inspired by the efficient factory system that had emerged in industrial America" (p. 35), both are founded—as Lepore claims disruptive innovation is—"on a profound anxiety about financial collapse, an apocalyptic fear of global devastation, and shaky evidence." To be sure, though Christensen makes much of the individual when he talks about "maximiz[ing] human potential," he outlines a core aspiration for schools to be to "hone the skills, capabilities, and attitudes that will help our economy remain prosperous and economically competitive" (1).

While both Sameea and Christensen are after more personalized education, Christensen seeks to "customize...student-centric learning" through "computer-based learning" and he describes such learning as "the escape hatch from the temporal, lateral, physical, and hierarchical cells of standardization" (p. 38). But Christensen's final vignette, as described above, doesn't seem an escape from the "temporal," "lateral," or "physical"; it seems a longing for them. While I am not at all opposed to technology in the classroom, I do wonder: is Christensen's non-fairytale version of disruption—cordoning off a kid and his computer so he can be as productive and competitive as possible—just another distraction from the human students in front of us? Has the alienation-inducing factory that Marx described just gotten a digital upgrade?

The last session of the day is on memoir. In the back of the room are two women—a mother and aunt of a student, I think—who I am pretty sure had been in the same two desks during the day's first session. I wonder if they've moved at all, if they ever made their way downstairs for the boxed turkey sandwiches and macadamia cookies. The women are still on their phones, occasionally addressing each other, occasionally looking up as someone new enters the room. When they see me, I smile.

The presenter is not smiling, clearly unsure of what to do with herself in these last few minutes before the session is to start. She checks something on her laptop, then goes out into the hall, comes back to the laptop, heads back to the hall. According to the program, she works in administration at Story Corps, and I'm guessing this room of middle-schoolers and parents is not her usual audience.

When she begins with a fancy PowerPoint featuring the kind of call-out questions against which I warn the student teachers I supervise, there is a lot of awkward silence. "Why is it important to tell our stories? Why is it important to listen to others' stories?" But after she plays a sample Story Corps interview—a boy with autism asking his mother about what it's like to be his parent—the kids start talking, a lot, about empathy in other words. Meanwhile, I start crying, just as I used to at 7:25 every Friday morning, the time when my local public radio station plays a Story Corps interview excerpt. I'd hear the segment when I was just about to arrive at the high school where I used to work, and I would often have to wait out my tears in the parking lot before rushing to make the 7:45 first period. Here, there is nowhere to hide, and I am thankful the lights have been turned down—thankful, too, to see another woman get out a Kleenex.

Now warmed up, the kids are relatively responsive to the presenter's request to share a family story. After the first volunteer contributes a tale about getting bitten by a donkey after feeding it a tortilla, animals seem to become the theme. The next volunteer tells of an alligator intruding on a Florida walk, and I consider raising my hand to tell of the old home movie I've seen of my grandma, in Yellowstone in the late 1920's, feeding peanuts to a young bear who pulls on her dress to ask for more.

Before I get the nerve to raise my hand, I see in the door window's frame one of the event's coordinators, someone I've been trying to find all day. I'm here, after all, to gauge my interest in working with the host organization, to see if events like these are how I want to charge into the world. As I gather my things, the presenter is beginning to pair off students to interview each other, warning the parents turning to their phones and purses that they are expected to participate, too. I make my apologies as I leave, insisting that I'm not chicken, just otherwise committed.

A couple meetings ago, Sameea arrived at my office half-disheartened, half-emboldened by a small act of rebellion. I encouraged her to write about what happened while I wrote a narrative of my own. When we were done writing, I listened to her story:

She'd been observing again at the inner-city high school where she'd been for a few weeks, and that day a boy she'd never seen before—"a young, Hispanic boy who had innocence in his eyes and walked with a limp"—sat down behind her

during the Creative Writing course. When group work on screenplays began, the boy stayed put. Sameea, excited to finally do more than observe, turned around to introduce herself. After pleasantries, the boy excused himself to go to the bathroom, at which point the teacher told Sameea that the boy had been out for weeks recovering from a gunshot wound. When the boy returned, Sameea smilingly got him on the classwork track and brainstorming for the assignment. As he answered her questions, Sameea could tell the boy was “reserved but thoughtful,” not the “street kid” he was billed to be. Still, she wasn’t expecting it when the boy became silent before asking: ““Can I write about what happened to me? I recently went through something and, yeah, I would like to write about that.”” Sameea encouraged him and he started sketching a plot in the third person: The guy goes to the store to buy chips. There is a robbery, and the guy gets shot by accident. He gets really hurt and his life changes...

Suddenly, Sameea had to get out of there. Between the boy and his experience and the piano music the teacher had put on, she felt “a rush of emotion” and knew she needed a minute. She told the boy she’d be right back and then took her turn in the bathroom. She took a “deeeep breath” and scolded herself for starting to cry. “This isn’t even about me,” Sameea thought. It was his story, not hers. She didn’t want to be one of those teachers who swooped in, thinking she could—or *should*—change a student’s life.

Not long after Sameea returned to the classroom, the teacher stopped by to check in and encouraged the boy to instead write fiction, the assignment’s real intent, told him he didn’t have to be “bound to what happened in his life.” When the teacher left, the boy lost his enthusiasm, becoming aimless in his drafting. At first, Sameea tried to talk genre, to “maintain a positive *learning* climate.” And then she thought: “What am I doing? I really, really just need to have a conversation with this kid.” Because the course was an elective, Sameea thought she might be able to get away with it, and so she turned the conversation to the more general, “careful not to pry.” Soon, he was back to his story and shifted to the first person: “I had surgery. It was my abdomen. It was bad.” Then they talked about other things, too, about why he had gotten his tattoos—“NO LOVE” in black script on each hand—and about her teaching program.

When the bell rang, they gave warm goodbyes, Sameea telling him, “I’m glad you came today.” It was her “honor and privilege” to hear his story. And now they had a story of their own.

After the sessions are over, there is to be a celebratory reading. I find a seat at the back of the school’s auditorium, excited to finish a *New Yorker* article while people trickle in. I know Sameea will find the article interesting—it’s about campus activism—but I want to finish it before recommending it. I’ve already highlighted

one sentence for her—“If students’ personal experiences are beside the pedagogical point, then diversity on campus serves a cosmetic role: it *is* a kind of tokenism.” For me, I highlight one activist student’s complaint: “I literally am so tired of learning about Marx, when he did not include race in his discussion of the market!” I am overwhelmed by all that these passages open up but am relieved by the thought that Sameea and I will be meeting again in a couple weeks and can talk them through, can challenge each other to *do* something with them. I think about how, when we write together, I’ll probably tell the story of today’s spoken word workshop, of envying the “teaching artist.” But now, it’s time to put away my things and listen. The reading is about to begin.

References

- Carter, J. L. (2016). 2016 CCCC chair’s address: Making, disrupting, innovating. *CCC*, 68(2), 378–408.
- Christensen, C., Johnson, C., & Horn, M. (2008). *Disrupting Class: How disruptive innovation will change the way the world learns*. New York, NY: McGraw Hill.
- Danielewicz, J. (2001). *Teaching selves: Identity, pedagogy, and teacher education*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Gardner, J. (1989). *Grendel*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Godbee, B. (2012). Toward explaining the transformative power of talk about, around, and for writing. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 47(2), 171–197.
- Heller, N. (2016, May 30). The big uneasy: What’s roiling the liberal-arts campus? *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/05/30/the-new-activism-of-liberal-arts-colleges>
- Lepore, J. (2014, June). The disruption machine. *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/06/23/the-disruption-machine>
- Marx, K. (1959). *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Moscow: Progress Publishers. (Original work published 1932). Retrieved from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/preface.htm>
- Ritchie, J. S. & Wilson, D. E. (2000). *Teacher narrative as critical inquiry*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Vilardi, T. & Chang, M. (2009). *Writing-based teaching: Essential practices and enduring questions*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press. 144–187.