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The Destinee Project: Shaping Meaning through Narratives

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Abstract

Using narrative method in the form of journaling has the power to shape identity and relationships between teachers and students. This article reflects on such journaling and the process of writing poetry to create a space of understanding between two very different people who found themselves in the relationship of teacher and student. "The Destinee Project" is a collection of poetry based on my journaling and narrative inquiry as I seek to deal with the experience of transition of my school and the struggles of my students. In the past ten years, our school has transitioned from an affluent homogenous group to an extremely diverse urban Title I school. My interaction with Destinee and my reflection on our experience together has helped shape my approach to students and parents. I hope to inspire others to engage in journaling and experience the efficacy of writing about classroom experiences.

> *We all tell our stories to give meaning to who we are, to where we belong, and to where we anticipate going (Hankins, 2003, p.138).*

Introduction

For more than twenty years, I have been a teacher and director of theatre. My life is measured in musicals; my days are spent in one act plays and discovering ways to connect people with emotions. Before I can ask students of theatre to portray the emotions of someone else, I try to help them explore their own and discover who they are. I try to awaken long dormant imaginations that were lulled to sleep by one too many multiple choice tests. My purpose in teaching theatre to adolescents is to help them find their voices and raise them confidently in their community. As a teacher of high school theatre, I teach groups of students diverse in ages and backgrounds. I watch as they come into class connected to headphones and iPods. Looking at the wires that connect them to their worlds, I wonder about those worlds. I am aware that the glimpse I get of each adolescent for ninety minutes every other day is fractured and insufficient. The little I observe clearly shows young people who are facing very grown-up problems. Most of the students in my class are upbeat and glad to be there. We do rewarding work in creative ways. I am showered with thank you notes and warm hugs by students and their parents.

But there is another side. A side that chills me. There are disturbing faces that I see in my mind at unguarded moments. In every class, I have at least one student who is a mom. In every class, I have at least one student who has been incarcerated or is on probation. In every class, I have at least one student struggling with addiction. Every day, I teach someone who is homeless. I want to slip them the silver bullet of education to use as ammunition against poverty, loneliness, and lack of fulfillment. In spite of my best intentions and most creative lesson plans, it seems some students elude me. They wander on and off my roster. Here today. Where are they tomorrow? As the demographics of our once affluent school changed, more and more students seem transient. This year I taught three homeless students. These are three that I know of. We have twenty-seven homeless children enrolled in our school; the social worker assures me that there are more students without homes than are currently documented.

Here am I: a well-intentioned middle-class white woman who has made it her life's calling to teach these students who are caught in the storms of life. I seek to offer shelter; sustenance; a safe place to learn. Every day when I enter my classroom I feel surrounded by the clouds of inevitable failure for me and for them. Most are desperate for direction. They want so much to belong. Some just want to have something to eat during lunch. I watch those clouds crumble and rain down confusion, rejection, and hunger.

Recently, my work as a teacher, my craft as an artist, and my role as a researcher have collided. Soon after beginning work as a doctoral student in language and literacy, I was introduced to the concept of arts-based research (ABR). Through ABR, I could see a space for my experience in theater and my study as a researcher to create a dialogue that could capture the character of teachers and students; through arts-based research perhaps I could craft a conversation that could help guide students and teachers to a safe place during their storms.

As a writer of plays, I constantly write dialogue. Much of that dialogue comes from what I hear people say every day. I write such verbal exchanges in my journal. Until reading Hankins' (2003) work *Teaching through the Storm*, I had not thought of journaling the stories of my classroom goings-on as a "technology of the mind" that would "enable [me] to peer more deeply" into the relationship with my students (Eisner as cited in Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008, p.21). Although I journal my life outside of teaching, I had never considered that I could "use reflective writing to build stronger student-teacher relationships and to craft my teaching differently" (Hankins, 2003, p.31). About the same time I was reading Hankins and beginning to journal my classroom narratives, a copy of Patricia Smith's (2010) artistic chronicling of hurricane Katrina, *Blood Dazzler,* made its way into my hands.

Only upon conversation with other emerging arts-based researchers did I see the connection among Hankins, Smith, and my potential to write poetry from the experiences I had begun to journal as a teacher. Just as Smith wrote about a natural disaster, so did Hankins, who used a storm as the guiding metaphor for her book. As certainly as Hankins felt the effects of an El Niño in her classroom, so I am experiencing the catastrophic devastation left in the wake of the hurricane of emotions brought about by the cold front of experience meeting the warm front of adolescent hormones. Add to that forecast poverty, technology, and urban opportunity, and suddenly there emerges a storm of such alarming proportions that I want to run for cover.

At first, that is what I did. More honestly, running for emotional cover is what I have been doing for years. After the first couple of ABR meetings, I wrote:

> "Poetry is risky business," the scholar says.
> Then she coyly says our assignment is
> to write a poem for next week's class.
> *Risk. Risk. Risk. Risk. Risk. Risk. Risk.*
> So I open my poet's eyes to
> see but I can't
> see because I am
> underneath

> a strategically placed and polished surface that politely reflects
> what looks into it.
> A never-to-be-looked through surface.
> A lid.

Indeed, I had put the proverbial "lid" on my emotions as an educator for so long because to feel the effects of the storms in the lives of the young people to whom I have devoted my best energies for most of my life was to hurt so deeply that any agency I may possess would be paralyzed. I learned to be emotionally detached from their plight in order to salvage my sanity and save my autonomy. No one in my life knew that I was living below the emotional radar. Writing poetry would "blow my cover," for just as the poet Monica Prendergast writes in the prologue to Saldana's anthology of ethnodrama that "theatre must never be boring," so I believe that poetry should never lie. If I am to write a poem, I will be honest, authentic, raw, real; therefore, I will do as Dell Perry (2010) shared in her autoethnographic dissertation: I will avoid writing as a means of self-protection.

About the time I admitted that avoiding writing poetry would only delay the inevitable and eventually I would have to turn in something to my professor, the books I ordered from Amazon arrived. I dutifully carried them in a red, white, and blue striped patriotic tote in the back of my mini-van. I remember where I was when the ice of paralyzing fear began to thaw. I was waiting at a local restaurant for my family. Yes, the planets aligned and in a strange set of circumstances, I found myself alone at a quiet table with about an hour to sip tea and read Hankins' *Teaching through the Storm*. With the turn of each page, a layer of fear melted until by page 58, my emotional lid had been somewhat pried open and the tears flowed so freely that the server asked if I needed some assistance. I assured her that I was fine and there was nothing like a good book. What I began to realize is that avoiding writing as a way of self-protection was not the next path in my journey. The next step for me would be to write as a means of self-preservation. I reached that place "where there is no choice but to work from your poetic self" (Behar as cited in Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008, p.67). I began to journal my experience in the classroom and write poetry from the emotional "hot spots" I discovered. Some of the writing that resulted from that discovery has become known to me as "The Destinee Project."

She walked into my classroom unescorted, unannounced, and without a pass. She was what my students called "mixed." She wasn't black. She wasn't white. She was certainly "mixed." I checked the roster, and her name did not appear. Other students acknowledged her by name, so I was fairly certain Destinee (pseudonym) was a student and not an intruder. She was entering my class during its "honeymoon" phase: the period of time between activities that encourage bonding and group cohesiveness and the moment when each student has to do the

work of memorizing a monologue and performing it on stage. The first few weeks of the first semester I throw out a wide net of theatre games into the tank hoping to catch lots of students to deliver to them to the deep ocean of drama. We were in the middle of a fast-paced, low-risk game called "Do you like your neighbor?" The students were openly having fun. Not a usual thing for teenagers in school. Destinee, however, refused to participate. She was alarmingly loud with her belligerent and cutting remarks to me. The first words she said to me were, “I got to get out of this bitch’s class.” If this was her way of trapping both of us into an impossible situation, I would not fall for it. I was the one with the net set out to get her. To bring her in. To let her see that she was on earth for a reason, and we could begin discovering that reason together. She shut me down at every turn. Every day. Every class.

The first three class periods Destinee attended were a battle of wills and words. She sat by the door, her arms folded, and her back to me. If I spoke to her, she rolled her eyes and exhaled a dismissive breath. I wouldn’t be dismissed, and I refused to respond in any way that wasn’t calm and respectful. I told her that I was glad she was in my drama class, and we would figure out a way for her to participate comfortably. The fourth day of class was different. Instead of sitting by the door, Destinee sat in the circle with the other students. Although she avoided eye contact with me, she watched the activity of her peers as they collaborated and performed a group fairy tale. After that fourth day of class, Destinee walked up to me and began a conversation by saying she didn’t need this class, but ended by asking with tears in her eyes and a "please, help me" in her voice, "What do you think I can do?" I was taken aback by the change in her intonation. There was pathos in her voice as she asked an adult in her life a question for which she seemed to want a genuine answer. I am not sure exactly what I replied. I think I said something like, "I think you can do anything and together we can figure it out.” Whatever my mouth answered was muffled by the beating of my heart as I realized that this person who was obstinate at every turn so wanted to know who she was and where she belonged. After the day she asked that question, she was absent several class periods in a row. Eventually, I received the notice from the registrar that Destinee had been withdrawn from school. Although I haven't seen her again since the day she asked me that surprisingly tender question, I have revisited our conversation many times since then through writing poems about our encounter.

As I began to journal the conversations and events surrounding my relationship with Destinee, I read the poetry of Patricia Smith as she reflected on the devastation of hurricane Katrina. One evening, I picked up Smith’s book off my dining room table intending to quickly read a poem or two, but with her first words, it seemed as if the air in my house turned balmy, and I could feel the heavy moisture mixed with dread. Flooded with fear, I read and read until I had swallowed every ounce of her poetry. I was submerged in her world and would not leave for a long, long time even after I closed her book. I decided to take some of her most moving

poems to use as a template for my writing. My poems that follow are patterned after those of Patricia Smith from her collection, *Blood Dazzler*. The specific poem of Smith's that I used as a template for my own is noted at the end of each of my poems. The dialogue that precedes some of the poems is taken from my journal and took place between Destinee and me at the time noted.

August 11, 2010 9:50 a.m.
Third Period Theatre Fundamentals Class
Independence High School

Teacher: So Destinee, this brings us to you. It's your turn.
Destinee: I'm not going to participate.
Teacher: Okay. Well, we'll have to think of something for you to do since your grade in this class is based on your participation.
Destinee: I don't care about that. This class isn't going to help me graduate.
Teacher: You're right. You probably don't need this class to graduate.
Destinee: You're right: I don't.
Teacher: Okay. Listen. This is your very first day. Why don't you participate as an observer? Watch the class and let me know what we can come up for you to do.
Destinee: I ain't watching nothing.
Teacher: Okay.

> Seated in the chair closest to the way
> Out,
>
> Closed up tight with blue jeans and no
> Smile
>
> Behind your eyes, and in your mouth a
> Knife

(Smith, *Blood Dazzler*, Luther B Ascends p.69)

August 11, 2010 11:10 a.m.
Third Period Theatre Fundamentals Class
Independence High School
(After watching the students leave the class when the bell rings, Destinee initiates a conversation with the teacher.)

Destinee: So what do I have to do to not fail this class?
Teacher: What did you see today that you think you could do?
Destinee: Nothing.
Teacher: Really?
Destinee: Really because I don't care.
Teacher: I think you care, because you do. Why else would you be talking to me?
Destinee: (No response)

I see
no one in the room who looks like me
And taste
plastic words spit on me by a white woman
and feel
skin melt with hot hate
and hear
the screams in silent stares
and want it
over

(Smith, *Blood Dazzler*, 7 P.M., Thursday, August 25, 2005 p.5)

August 11, 2010 11:12 a.m.
Third Period Theatre Fundamentals Class
Independence High School

Teacher: Okay. Well, maybe you want to check with your counselor to see if you need an elective to graduate. If you do, this course would count as that elective.
Destinee: It would.
Teacher: Yep.
Destinee: So this class will count as an elective?
Teacher: Yep.
Destinee: So what would I have to do?
Teacher: What do you want to do?
Destinee: What do you think I can do?

August 23, 2010 9:38 a.m.
Third Period Theatre Fundamentals Class
Independence High School

Destinee is absent for the fourth consecutive class. I make a note to remind me to contact her mom during my planning period. I am looking up her contact number at the beginning of planning when the voice from the intercom in my classroom booms so loudly I jump.
Intercom Announcement: *"Staff Reminder to Meet in E101 for Professional Learning during your Planning Period"*

Go. The box on the wall speaks. Spend 60 minutes of breath in Room E101 to be professionally developed by a "I taught middle school for two years fifteen years ago" from the County Office who advertises that she is out of touch on misspelled Power Points and in poorly crafted questions.
Go. The cellular box in my hand says. Stop everything else to meet in Ms. Gray's Third Grade classroom to unravel the spun gold of my child's imagination and repurpose it to make his thoughts into cardboard cutouts so he will fit in a box.
Go. The desk calendar, with its boxes and boxes and boxes printed on a page, whose lines bar time and take prisoners, commands that I go and meet and buy and sign and fix and kiss and wave and pack and make and feed and drive and go.
Go. So I go. Like even if I could take a moment to locate her contact information I have the power to raise the rod and part the waters of "not right now" "wait" "I'll be back in a minute" "did you say something" "I'm sorry. I didn't see
you there."

(Smith, *Blood Dazzler*, Man on the TV Say p.7)

August 30, 2010 9:41 a.m.
Third Period Theatre Fundamentals Class
Independence High School

Destinee Smith is absent again. I haven't seen this student since August 11.
I take a moment and call one of the three contact numbers. That number has been disconnected. I never try another.

What's the matter

alone, unholy, queasy from too much
me

teacher

but what luck, the bell will ring
tomorrow

did you forget

all over again.

to care?

(Smith, *Blood Dazzler*, Golden Rule Days p.73)

Discussion

In his book *Teaching with Poverty in Mind*, Eric Jensen (2009) says simply, "School can help turn children's lives around, but only if the children show up (p.10)." After twenty-three years of teaching, I am seeking an answer to the question, "How can I help my students 'show up' to school?" I seek to know what connection I can make with my students that will give them educational resiliency and to find ways that connection can be replicated for other teachers and their students. Since my question centers on my lived experience in the classroom, I turned to narrative method as a tool to forge an answer to my question. In examining narrative method, Hankins offers that, for the researcher, chronicling daily dialogue and emotional climate should be purposeful and systematic. "Especially in places as founded on relationships as schools are, we must be acutely aware of the shape that our narrative selves give to our dealings with others and to recognize how the lived experiences of those we teach shape their ability to deal with us" (Hankins, 2003, p.156). With every narrative, we re-search ourselves, our responses, our outcomes. The "narrative of …lived experiences are in continual negotiation" (Nicholson, 2005, p.15). Through these negotiations, new practices can be discovered and shared with many who can apply them to their unique relationships. As I began to write specifically about Destinee, I began to see the truth in what Hankins meant when she wrote, "When I write about a child or an event…I feel that we have spent special time together. And the time I spend off the chronological measure of the day prepares me to listen better and contributes to the way that we build relationships" (Hankins, 2003, p.17). Through journaling, I could respond to Destinee without fearing that I would say something to hurt her. From my writing about Destinee, I have been able "to fashion more continuous face-to-face relationships with children who are less like me than are other children" (Hankins,

2003, p. 156). It was when I began journaling that I began to see Destinee as more than just a student in my class, but as a person in this world.

The new-to-me practice of journaling modeled by Hankins was further influenced by the poetry of Patricia Smith. In addition to specific journaling serving to craft classroom practices, writing poetry about those experiences gave me a space to engender feelings. By writing poetry in the fashion of another poet, I was given a safe place to develop my skills and assess my emotions. Because I didn't have to create a form, I could focus on the feelings found in the chronicles of my daily classroom life. Patricia Smith's poetry template was like a delicious recipe to follow. It was my task to add the details about a stormy moment in the classroom and how it made me feel. As I searched for the ingredients to write the poems about our encounters, I tried to see the classroom from Destinee's perspective. What did I look like to her? Through her eyes, how did the other students sound when they "tagged" her as she walked in the classroom? Where had she come from? Did she have so much real-life drama that she couldn't see the value of the manufactured drama of the class activities? Why was she absent? What made her withdraw from school? Where is she now? In my effort to choose the most apt word or phrase in my poetry, I had to ask these questions and grapple with the answers.

I believe in the efficacy of education. It was, after all, as a student in school that I was prompted to explore writing about my experience as a teacher. My exposure to both Hankins and Smith was the result of fulfilling an assignment given by my instructor in a context that encouraged arts-based inquiry. My fellow-students were eager to learn about using the arts in research and offered peer review of my work. These factors created an environment that provided a "Zone of Proximal Development" (Lobman & Lundquist, 2007, p.7). In other words, I had the support of a network of people to help me stretch my knowledge and develop my understanding. I was given permission to make connections between "public" scholarship and "private" knowing as a teacher and human being. Certainly, I can bring this connection into my own classroom and allow my students the same carefully crafted academic opportunities and powerful network of support from me and their peers.

Although I see how my writing about this particular situation has expanded my experience and clarified my thinking, as a budding researcher in education, I must ask the "so what" question. What light does this particular candle shed on the world of education at large? Does my writing "offer ways to stretch our capacities for creativity and knowing, creating a healthy synthesis of approaches to write in ways that paint a full picture of a heterogeneous movement to improve education" (Cahnmann, 2003, p.34)? As I sought an answer to these questions, I reflected on my experience as a student, my identity as a teacher, the structure of my classroom, and the assignments I give to my students. I started to assess the support system I

create for my own students. I am convinced that educators should be encouraged to write reflectively on their lives in the classroom. In writing about Destinee, I had to measure each of my responses and notice how they were received by Destinee. I analyzed my words and actions for opportunities to strengthen the atmosphere of acceptance for all of those who find themselves on my roster. Through my journaling, I have new empathy for those who call me teacher. I am "constantly practicing what [I am] asking others to do and evolving theoretical principles from that practice" (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995, p.4). I believe that through journaling classroom experiences, teachers can invoke the "stance," the "way of life" that Johnny Saldana (2005) included in his anthology of ethnodrama, the work of Charles Vanover, "Chalkboard Concerto: Growing Up as a Teacher in the Chicago Public Schools." Vanover writes, "At Erickssen, I learned that love is not a relationship you have with a person. It's a stance. It's a way of life. It's a power that you invoke if you're worthy of it" (p.67).

Destinee is gone from my classroom, but the destiny of many is ever-present. I wish that Destinee was still my student so she could reap the results of my heightened awareness of her as a person. I wish my writing could inform my interactions with her and shape our relationship. In pondering life from her perspective, a new empathy was fostered between me and other students in my classroom. This empathy translated into new approaches to teaching my students. With a renewed patience and revived curiosity, I searched the professional reading section in our media center for books about the urban experience and the effects of poverty on students in their struggle for an education. After a conversation with our administrator about these topics, I discovered a network of teachers and parents in our high school who seek to help the homeless students among us. At an after-school drama meeting, I presented this issue with our students. They caught the vision of the needs of others and are currently participating in several outreach projects within our school and outside in our community.

The results from spending time with Destinee in absentia as I journaled our interactions and wrote poetry about her are tangible. My life and the lives of my students have been shaped by her simple question, "What do you think I can do?"

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