

The Stories in History

Bringing the Past to Life in an Eighth-Grade Social Studies Class

SUSAN BUTTENWIESER

AS THE COMMON CORE STANDARDS are being integrated into New York City public schools, students' writing skills have gained new importance and focus. Schools are trying to keep up with the new standards by emphasizing writing in lesson plans and units in all subjects. The result is that teaching artists are now sometimes asked to go places they haven't been before.

This past winter, I taught creative writing to eighth-graders in the Bronx at the New Millennium Business Academy. But instead of working with the students during ELA periods, I spent fourteen days in their Social Studies classes.

During my residency, the students were studying America's Progressive Era, which took place at the turn of the twentieth century. This was an especially vibrant time in U.S. history, ripe with the drama of labor strikes, social upheaval, and an influx of immigrants living in abject poverty. I had the added benefit of working for the second year with a highly skilled

classroom teacher who not only had the respect and devotion of his students but was also adept at project-based learning and completely open to creative ideas.

We decided that the residency would focus specifically on New York City because so many important historical events of the time were happening right here, and also to assist the students in drawing the link between the past and the present.

I started off the residency by asking students to think about their own family history and journey to New York City. Drawing inspiration from *The Story in History: Writing Your Way into The American Experience* by Margot Fortunato Galt (Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 2007), an excellent book full of ideas about creative writing and history, we talking about how history is made up of personal stories and the power of those stories. The social reforms of the Progressive Era, for example, were begun by ordinary people and inspired by their stories. Students were instructed to do some research into their family's history, find out as much as they could about where their families were from and how they came to live in New York City. We read *My Name* by John Minczeski, one of the poems in *The Story in History*, and then students wrote narratives on their own histories.

Then we stepped back into the past. My main hope for this residency was that through creative writing, students would have a more visceral sense

Susan Buttenwieser utet iuscipit at, senibh eu feum duis nonsenim quisi blamet dipsum venit wis aut wis nismod min henit vulla feugiat, commy num velese magnis nonsed magna consed min vel dignit, sumsandrer sectetum niatum doloreet, quam, corper alisl dolore modolore magna coAd te vero odit lam dio dolorem dui blaorpero dolobor augiamet la autet auguer summolore min enis duipisis aut am, velisit, quat am, senismolent irilit la commy nit vel inissed tissed magnisi tat ver in utpat. Ure modo odolumsan ut iriustio ex erat.

of New York City during the Progressive Era and a broader understanding of the issues, social reforms, and movements of the time, such as women's suffrage, workers rights, child labor, civil rights and the anti-war movement. I thought the best way to accomplish this was for the students to imagine themselves living during this time by creating characters and writing a short story set during the early 1900s.

Before we began working on the larger writing pieces, the students completed shorter in-class pieces of writing that emphasized different literary techniques and I brought in writing models which detailed some of the social issues of the time.

In order to give a detailed sense of life inside a New York City tenement, we read an excerpt from Jacob Riis' *How The Other Half Lives*. We discussed sensory details and I asked students to underline places in the text where sensory details were used while we read it out loud. We also looked at photographs of tenements on the Smart Board and talked about what it might have been like to live in the place depicted.

Conditions in the tenements were horrendous. For example, a ten-day heat wave in 1896 killed almost 1,500 New Yorkers, many of them tenement dwellers. Some people actually died falling off fire escapes where they slept to escape the incredible heat inside their overcrowded apartments that lacked basic amenities like running water. Toilets in tenement apartments were often out in the hallway and shared with multiple units and people had to collect water for cooking, cleaning and bathing by filling up buckets from spigots on the streets. Livestock were often kept in the back of the buildings and disease spread easily. Many children living in these tenements worked instead of going to school.

I particularly wanted students to gain more con-

fidence in their use and understanding of sensory details and similes. These literary techniques seemed likely to help students think more deeply about all the ways it felt to be in New York City at this time. Students were asked to imagine themselves living in a tenement and to describe their home, using all five senses. Students were also given photographs to look at while they wrote.

We moved onto child laborers and looked at photographs of children working in factories, on the docks, selling newspapers and fresh produce on the streets, shining shoes. We talked again about sensory details and how unsafe the working conditions were for those children, and the long-term health prob-

lems they developed as a result. Students then imagined they were one of the child workers in the photograph and wrote a diary entry, thinking also about their living conditions.

We listened to a recording of an excerpt from Upton Sinclair's, *The Jungle*, which described conditions inside a meatpacking factory. We also looked at photographs of these factories and discussed

the widespread health problems. We talked about the significance of writers like Sinclair and Riis, and the impact of their writing and how it led to the passage of important legislation. Students then wrote descriptions of a meal from the time, thinking about the conditions inside the meatpacking factories.

Before beginning work on their short stories, I wanted the students to start thinking about characters, story structure, and to begin fictionalizing real events from the past. We read about Emma Goldman's life as a Russian immigrant in New York, and how, like many immigrants of that time, she got involved in the labor, women's, and anti-war movements. She also spent time in jail for being a revolutionary. After reading an informational text about Goldman and having a discussion about fairy tales,

Exerehenis qui nam fugitas
explabo. Estrum eturia
cone cumquas pelest, ea
suntur, oditionet liam qui
occus, sunt ipis volorum
qui id experum et laborep
ratisquias as essin consequi

Bor moluptas nistiae volectio conse es exceaqu
 officiuntia aut porepel estiatis dolorit id eostia de
 sitatem remquos reptae. Et que rem eos quiasitia
 cuptio odis dolor re mintur alicia ius ent ilit
 adignim faccus sumquas aliquuntem faceat as si
 quo totatem voluptio tem ressequis molestrum

students created their own fairy tales based on the facts of Emma Goldman's life.

When it was time for the students to begin work on their short stories, I first had them focus on creating a main character. I gave them a character worksheet as a guide, asking them to think about some of the qualities and facts about their character before they started their story. They came up with names, ages, family structure, family history, and issues for their character to be struggling with.

Once that was done, I gave them a suggested outline for their five-paragraph story. During each class, in addition to working on their story, we reviewed literary terms, historical facts and events, and the details of every day life. Students were given several days to complete a rough draft and then another several days for revision. For some students, this meant that they were able to work over an extended period of time and go through many steps of revision. For others who struggled to complete writing assignments, it meant that they had enough time, in most cases, to complete a five-paragraph story with relevant details.

Students had the freedom to create a fictional character but the parameter of facts within which to frame their story. The end result were stories told from the point of view of suffragettes, child laborers, recent immigrants, tenement dwellers and factory workers. Students wrote both from the perspective of adults and children, describing their homes, the food they ate, their work, using sensory details, similes and vivid descriptions.

One story, "Women's Rights, No More Fights!!" by Genesis Caban detailed the life of an abused woman who was involved in the women's movement: "My

neighbors and I were out protesting in front of the White House. It was a cloudless, hot summer day of 1912 and I was outside, sweating bullets. All of this hassle was worth it because at the end of the day, I would be satisfied because I was part of something that made a change."

Through the process of writing their short stories, my students gained a fresh perspective on historical events and a greater depth of understanding of the people who lived through them. By envisioning the Progressive Era through the eyes of the characters they created, the students were able to make the stories in history come alive. 🗨️