

Writing Out the Storm

Creating Weather Stories in a Fourth-Grade Science Class

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I BEGAN MY RESIDENCY in Ms. Chu and Ms. Kelley's fourth-grade classes at East Harlem's MS 012 in November 2012, about a month after Superstorm Sandy interrupted the fall semester. My task: to engage the students in extended creative writing in conjunction—or “across,” in edu-speak—their science curriculum. The twist? Implementing the relatively new Common Core standards into my assignments, without sacrificing the creativity or personality a Teachers & Writers residency encourages.

In elementary school, students learn the very basics of scientific inquiry. Using simple materials and resources to observe and describe scientific facts and reactions (why do magnets attract or repel each other?), amass necessary vocabulary (“habitat” and “predator”), and begin to write lab and research reports. These skills don't translate obviously to “creative” writing—especially for younger students who are not almost firm on the difference between fact and fancy.

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Ms. Chu and Ms. Kelley's students were energetic, eager to please, and very bright. Embracing readings by Margaret Atwood and Shakespeare, they wrote poems and stories about animals (“I Am a Conger Eel,” “On Being A Crazy Clownfish”) and magnetic superheroes.

Sometimes it was difficult for them to parse the differences between scientific and creative writing. I asked several students to describe the taste of their animal's food, only to receive the answer, “I don't know what a crustacean tastes like!” Once I reminded them we were talking about shrimp, however, the kids almost started drooling over their own luscious descriptions: sweet, pink, and crunchy.

Memoir has long been my favorite genre for combining observed and imagined prose. For our final project, Superstorm Sandy seemed the perfect topic. Surely, the students would be eager to recount their experiences and emotions about such a recent and major event. Just in case anyone wanted to go in another direction, I made sure the assignment allowed a focus on other extreme weather experiences as well. Either way, I was asking for observation and feeling, descriptive language both in their reporting and their inner lives. Before they began writing, I assigned an excerpt from Ray Bradbury's short story “All Summer

in a Day” (about life on perpetually rainy Venus), and Langston Hughes’ gloriously simple poem “April Rain Song.”

Finding detail and meaning in their stories would be relatively easy, I assumed. Sandy had built-in dramatic impact. When the storm finally hit after days of anticipation, that wind was *loud*. I’d spent the week glued to my computer, anxiously examining flood levels in vulnerable areas, trying to participate in what little volunteering my neighborhood-bound status would allow. I figured these kids wouldn’t have been assessing the block-to-block impact, but must have all had Big Experiences.

I’d forgotten one of the cardinal rules of childhood: time off school trumps everything. These kids had been out of classes for a whole week! They didn’t care about the storm. Didn’t I understand? There’d been *no school*. Initial responses included: “Sandy wasn’t a big deal to me.” “My family was fine, we didn’t lose power.” And, most common: “I played video games and watched tv.”

I realized this was developmentally appropriate. Fourth-graders are young, just past the point of monsters under the bed. Even if they found Sandy frightening, many of them explained that their parents hadn’t told them “much” about its effects around the city. As a parent of a small child myself, I knew I would shield my daughter from the more intense aspects of a storm engulfing our home city. Now, however, Sandy was over, and I was asking the students to act like scientists—and members of a community.

“Sandy affected all of us, because we all live in New York City,” Ms. Kelley explained to her class, after the initial round of “Sandy didn’t mean anything to me” answers. “When your parents can’t take the train to work, or when someone you love doesn’t have power, how do you feel?”

One girl shyly raised her hand, saying, “I felt worried for my aunt. She lives on Long Island.”

“Okay,” I said, “so put that in your piece.”

“My mom couldn’t make any money that week,” another added.

“Right,” I answered. “That’s an intense impact.”

All Summer in a Day

RAY BRADBURY

It had been raining for seven years; thousands upon thousands of days compounded and filled from one end to the other with rain, with the drum and gush of water, with the sweet crystal fall of showers and the concussion of storms so heavy they were tidal waves come over the islands. A thousand forests had been crushed under the rain and grown up a thousand times to be crushed again. And this was the way life forever on the planet Venus, and this was the schoolroom of the children of the rocket men and women who had come to a raining world to set up civilization and live out their lives.

April Rain Song

LANGSTON HUGHES

Let the rain kiss you.

Let the rain beat upon your head with silver liquid drops.

Let the rain sing you a lullaby.

The rain makes still pools on the sidewalk.

The rain makes running pools in the gutter.

The rain plays a little sleep-song on our roof at night—

And I love the rain.

Now that they were thinking about the bigger picture, I tried to expand their purview even more.

“How many of you have heard of climate change?” I asked. In both classrooms, several hands shot up.

“Do you think there’s a relationship between all these big storms we’ve been getting and global warming?”

“Yes!” The boy who called this out was also raising his hand, in a particularly desperate, I-will-pass-out-if-you-don’t-call-on-me-now way. No, he couldn’t remember any more sensory details about his experience of Sandy, but he wanted to write about the

greenhouse effect and global warming. Exactly the exclusively fact-based, expository nonfiction writing we were trying to avoid.

Freeze the scene here, at this perfect challenging moment. Will I encourage the boy to write about global warming? After all, he could produce a grade-appropriate piece. The Common Core Literacy Standards 4.7 and 4.8 read: “Conduct short research projects that build knowledge through investigation of different aspects of a topic. Recall relevant information from experiences or gather relevant information from print and digital sources; take notes and categorize information...”

But my mission as a teaching artist—and my vocation as a writer—requires me to ask for something more in the classroom. Yes, he and his similarly now-enthusiastic classmates could write about global warming. For our next meeting, I brought in articles from the *New York Times* Education Section to help them understand this challenging material. However, the students still had to meet *my* standards: to write about their own experiences, with vivid and personal language. I hadn’t anticipated that some students would feel freer to use creative language only *after* they wrote a draft of reassuringly comprehensible fact.

By using personal experience, as well as the language and tools they associate with “creative” writing, these young people were able to write about global warming, one of the great problems their generation will have to face. The fourth graders of MS 012 will continue to write expository nonfiction in their Science classes. My hope is that they will remember to keep examining the connections between the topics they study and the real world in which they live. Great writing should make such connections.

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Stormy Weather Assignment

Weather is a part of our environment and a part of our daily geography. Here in New York City, the weather is *usually* fairly predictable. It’s hot in the summer, and cold in the winter. It doesn’t snow in July, and (unfortunately) we can’t go swimming in the ocean in February.

But wait... *is* our weather in New York always so predictable after all? Don’t we have storms—blizzards, hurricanes, even tornadoes?? What is it like when these “extreme weather events” happen?

As you’re beginning to study magnetism and the physical properties of the world, observing the weather and understanding the way events affect your life is very important.

For the final project, you will write a short autobiographical story about YOUR most Extreme Weather Event. Use all five senses to describe the day, and write from your own POV. Here are some prompts to get you started:

The sky was the color of...

We didn’t have school that day because...

I felt scared when I saw...

I felt excited when I heard...

Stormy Weather Student Writing

Worst Summer or Fun Summer

ALFAYED ALAM, MS. CHIU’S CLASS

I am in Bangladesh. I am six years old. There is a harsh rain. This happens in Rangpur. We are in my father’s house.

BOOM! The roof bends and it is made out of tin.

ZZZT! We are out of power.

We go outside to see what is happening. A car

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window breaks because the rain has escalated in power. Suddenly, the rain stops and the sky turns purple. I feel like Megatron and his dark Energon have landed on Earth. Did the rain stop? I think that is eccentric, so I predict the rain will go on. I was correct.

The harsh rain uses all its energy. It used up so much power the harsh rain turns into a weak rain and the violence has stopped. . . .

Stormy Weather: Hurricane Sandy

ANIS CHOUDURY, MS. KELLEY'S CLASS

In October, there was Hurricane Sandy. That hurricane made so much wind that it was super strong, and a hybrid storm.

Hurricane Sandy could have been worse. On the news, it said the only reason why Sandy didn't hit NYC was because a radiation wave from the north hit Sandy, which made it go around NYC and caused the Nor'easter.

So many streets were flooded. There was no school for a week. People lost their homes. Some of those people don't have a home now.

During that time, my dad still had to work. The reason is that he is a police safety agent. He needed to serve people medical care, food, etc. They needed to stay there until their house was fixed. . . . 🍷