



The Moving Story Project

Watching Words Come Alive

HARRIET RILEY

SIX MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS GATHER in a circle in a corner of their classroom and brainstorm ways to “show” a class poem in a stop-motion video.

“Let’s cut a long road out of a brown paper bag,” says Daniela.

“Good idea,” Antonio says. “We each can use that as a background. Every line could take place along that road.”

“I’m going to use a toy cow for my line and take pictures of it moving along the road,” says Sergio.

Elizabeth looks at her storyboard sketches, jumps up, and says, “I’ll make a paper hat with a feather flying onto the road for my line.”

The students continue to share ideas and sketch onto their storyboards as the writer-in-residence walks around the room supervising each small group.

Combine filmmaking, writing, and middle school students and you get a rich mix of creativity and

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self-discovery. The Moving Story Project, based in Houston, Texas, offers inner-city students from late elementary grades to high school the opportunity to practice creative writing and develop filmmaking skills as they write poems and turn them into animated stop-motion films. The students take part in every part of the process, from drafting their original poems to creating storyboards, building sets, recording audio, and, finally, shooting the footage.

This innovative school-based program was developed just over two years ago in a collaboration between Writer in the Schools (WITS) Houston and Aurora Picture Show, a Houston-based non-profit micro-cinema. It was a natural partnership, says WITS Associate Director Long Chu, as both programs “recognize the importance of providing high-quality arts education to children as they learn and develop into adulthood.”

In each school the Moving Story Project visits, a writer and filmmaker work with students to create rich, visually-oriented writing. “The students learn where a word can take you and how an image can make it stronger,” says Camilo Gonzalez, the media arts education manager at Aurora, who worked with WITS writer Sara Cooper to develop the Moving Story Project. Cooper had worked previously in technology camps in New Mexico, where she says she witnessed how powerful it could be for students to make their

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words come alive through audio and film. In planning the project, Cooper says she wanted to keep writing at the forefront. When she brought the Moving Story Project to her students at Kaleidoscope Middle School, a multicultural inner-city school where she was a writer-in-residence, she had her students work with the poems they had created after reading Sandra Cisneros’s “My Name” essay from *The House on Mango Street*. Cooper had each student select one line from his or her poem, then asked them to work together to combine their individual lines into stanzas using group storyboards. “This meant they had to collaborate on revising and on conceptualizing story in new ways,” Cooper says.

Gonzalez, who worked with Cooper as the filmmaker on this first project, said that storyboarding is “where the magic happens.” Working together in groups, students come up with images that will communicate their lines of poetry visually in six small squares on the storyboard. Each student ends up with essentially one line in the final piece and it must work cohesively with the other writing from their group.

“This kind of collaboration and transferring between modes encourages a particular kind of critical thinking,” says Cooper. “The students are continually problem-solving, and writing is at the center of this.”

After students participating in the Moving Story Project finish creating their storyboards, they move on to designing their own sets. Materials they have used range from recycled objects to personal photos, mirrors, shoeboxes, cucumbers, construction paper, pipe cleaners, and more. The sets are created in a group with input from every student. Once the sets are finished, the students help shoot footage with stop-motion animation techniques. On the last day of the project, students view their finished film and get copies of the DVD to take home to share with their families.

Aurora Picture Show has submitted all six of

the films created through the Moving Story Project so far to film festivals, and one was recently selected for a youth film festival. With or without

a broader audience, however, Gonzalez says the project is extremely valuable because it allows students to “discover their voice” and to hone their creative and critical-thinking skills by working with professional writers and filmmakers.

In each school the Moving Story Project visits, the focus of the writing and the film is different, reflecting the interests of the students. At the Kaleidoscope Middle School, the focus was on the school’s multicultural community. An elementary school in the Heights neighborhood of Houston chose an environmental focus, and students at another school wrote about their dreams for the future.

Emily Triantaphyllis, a young documentary filmmaker who worked on a recent project at KIPP Middle School with another WITS writer, said that the program lets students see “how writing and filmmaking work hand in hand,” while giving them an opportunity to create in ways that are not typically available in the classroom. Cooper agrees, and says she has witnessed how the unique nature of the Moving Story Project has allowed a number of students—previously tentative about writing—to move into leadership roles. “Someone has to lead the group for the project to work, and it isn’t always the student you’d expect who steps up,” says Cooper.

By the end of each residency, all of the various pieces of the project—the writing, the collaboration, the storyboarding, the creation of the sets, and the filming—lead back to one central focus, says Cooper: “What is behind the Moving Story Project is the story,” she says. “The technology just allows the stories to come alive in ways that are tangible for the students.” 📺

To view some of the stop-motion animation films by students in the Moving Story Project, go to:

vimeo.com/24487496
vimeo.com/68330980

Giving More on the Page

On Writing and Vulnerability

LIZ ARNOLD

LAST YEAR, while leading a professional development workshop for a dozen teachers at the Brooklyn middle school where I'd been teaching, I realized we'd veered off course from talking about the craft of personal narratives, as my agenda stated at the top. Despite the detailed outline I'd scripted, nervous as I was about being a new teaching artist, we'd somehow wandered into territory I hadn't anticipated, and emotions throughout the room had grown intense while we shared with each other—strangers, really—our fears, beliefs, and weaknesses. We'd started the workshop by reviewing the elements of persuasive writing, essays, and other kinds of nonfiction, but after a warm-up exercise exploring our values, we found that a revelatory sense of community had sprung up among us from an unexpected source: our vulnerability.

Vulnerability had been a buzzword for some months. Everyone seemed to be talking about the 2010 TEDx Houston talk, "The Power of Vulnerability," which was making the rounds via e-mail chains, Facebook updates, and media coverage. The speaker,

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Brené Brown, is a social worker and a professor on the subject, and the twenty-minute video explores some of her fascinating research on shame, fear, "the courage to be imperfect," and allowing ourselves "to be deeply seen." She struck a chord: the video has had nearly ten million views on the TED website alone, and her related book, *Daring Greatly*, was published in 2012.

The premise of my professional development workshop was that examining our beliefs can make us better prepared to write from personal experience. I started with an exercise I'd developed inspired by the radio show, "This I Believe," which first aired in the 1950s. The purpose of the series—during McCarthyism, racial segregation, and the Cold War—was to create room for dialogue about a range of personal beliefs. Jackie Robinson, Helen Keller, Margaret Sanger, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Albert Einstein are a few of the better-known early contributors, and their brief essays are still available at www.ThisIBelieve.org.

The exercise I gave the teachers was to review a list of fifteen axioms people generally hold true: "An eye for an eye..." "Killing is wrong." "People learn from their mistakes." "Money can't buy happiness." And so on. I asked the teachers to pair up and find one from the list that they strongly agreed with, and one that they strongly disagreed with, and then explain their position to their respectful, listening partner. I

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gave them ten minutes, plunked two flimsy cartons of doughnuts on the table, and hoped for the best.

Ms. F., one of the teachers, glanced at the list. "Liz," she said, "I'm in therapy. I can't deal with this." She curled up with her iPad and waved her hand as if to rid herself of the trouble. Ms. F. was characteristically tough, but I liked her brash sense of humor, so I let it go. I also thought it seemed a little strange for her to make a stink, but I believe you can never know what someone's going through, and it crossed my mind that maybe it was actually a pretty stupid exercise, after all. "Okay," I said, joking with her, "talk it out on the couch."

I looked over the list of axioms again while eavesdropping on the teachers' conversations. I was intrigued that Mr. B. admitted he strongly disagreed that people learn from their mistakes. *Some of these kids*, he was saying, trailing off. *I have to tell them a million times...* Then my eyes rested on a sentence that made my stomach turn. "You can't depend on anyone else; you can only depend on yourself."

I'd had the same reaction a few days earlier when I first read it. At the time, I brushed away my discomfort to urgently plan my lesson, but during the few moments of peace in the room full of preoccupied, chattering teachers, I read it again and located the painful, buried source: It was something my father used to say. My father who killed himself, and who left me with my own story of vulnerability to tell.

Vulnerability, as defined in *Merriam-Webster*:

- 1: capable of being physically or emotionally wounded
- 2: open to attack or damage : assailable

Since I've started writing about my father's suicide, vulnerability has become a topic of personal

interest. I've noticed that the more I give on the page—the more I admit fear and sadness and grief and weakness—the better the writing is. It springs from emotions in the heart and

gut, not the intellectual mind, which loves to compartmentalize and seek order in the sticky muck of feelings.

Making yourself vulnerable is a conduit to human connection, but this reward doesn't come without risk. Writing about the personal exposes you, makes you vulnerable to criticism. Vulnerability takes courage. Brené Brown says that the word courage "comes from the Latin word *cor*, meaning heart—the original definition was to tell the story of who you are with your own heart." I love this idea, to write your story with your heart. "Fill your paper with the breathings of your heart," wrote William Wordsworth. "Every dance is a kind of fever chart, a graph of the heart," said choreographer Martha Graham, following the beat.

I didn't always understand the power of vulnerability. I learned it by taking a risk and sharing my scary, sad, suicide story with classmates in MFA workshops, with readers of literary journals, with listeners who come to my readings. I'm always surprised and touched by what people give me in return—often their trust to confide in me that they, too, have lost someone to suicide, or that they're writing about another kind of loss. People are hungry for connection, hungry to recognize their story in yours, even though the specifics will always be your own. That's what makes a story authentic, and authenticity is what makes a reader able to identify with a story.

It's not easy coming to terms with being vulnerable, and we all have any number of systems for self-protection firmly in place. Biologically, we're hardwired to flinch and blink, thank goodness, but it's important to learn to tell our stories with our heart, or at least try to give the heart a little more space on the page. One reason yogis practice inversions is because it's a rare time when the heart is above the head,

literally and metaphorically.

Artist and writer Joe Brainard embraced vulnerability as an essential part of the human condition and of art-making. An excerpt from his diary entry from May 4, 1969, reads: “I feel very much on the verge (at last) of being a little more free of myself. But not quite. I mean like, more open, less nervous, and more human. More vulnerable. It may be a perverse thing to want, but that’s what I want. I want to be more vulnerable.”

Then there’s the late poet David Ignatow, who in a 1979 interview with the *Paris Review* said “The fear of being vulnerable prompts me into bringing myself forward. It’s like being on the battlefield. As you engage in battle, you begin to feel fear; but as you make contact with the enemy, he’s almost your friend because he’s reducing the fear to excitement and participation.” When the interviewer asks Ignatow if there’s danger in having his vulnerability misunderstood, Ignatow responds like a warrior: “I couldn’t care less. This is what I have to feel, this is what I have to write.”

Back in the workshop, I was still thinking of my father’s voice and advice when the ten minutes I’d allotted for the exercise were up, and I stopped the teachers to hear what each pair had to say. Mr. B., who proposed that people don’t learn from their mistakes, defended his position, and a woman across the room jumped in to stand up for him. Here was an unexpected benefit: teachers learned who on staff shared their beliefs.

Next, Ms. P. strongly disagreed with “Killing is wrong.” She said she used to agree, but then two family members were murdered back home in Haiti. Ms. F. raised her eyebrows and looked up from her iPad. Ms. P. said she’d kill that murderer if she could, and standing from her chair as her voice rose, too, said that if there’s a god who judges her, that’s between her and him at the gates. She left the room to get a glass of water, and the teachers wondered aloud about murder and justice, euthanasia and illness—chins on fists, brows furrowed. I wondered privately if this was

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getting too political, if I was headed for trouble. Then somebody mentioned suicide as a form of killing, and I realized that like Ms. P., I had a shift in my beliefs, and I wanted to talk about it.

“My father always said that if I wanted something done right,” I told them, “I’d have to do it myself. That at the end of the day, you really only have yourself.” I explained that I guess he was trying to embolden me, the middle child, and his advice had actually helped a lot when I was young. But years later when I was an adult of twenty-five, that guy who told me you can’t always depend on people ended up killing himself. A collective gasp sucked the air out of the room.

“I hadn’t really thought about this until today,” I said. My voice cracked. “But would he have killed himself if he felt he could’ve depended on someone enough to ask for help?”

This must be what Brown meant about being “deeply seen.” I felt raw and exposed and flushed and—to my surprise—warmly connected to people I barely knew. Along with the wounds and fear around vulnerability, there’s tenderness and a yearning to belong, and the desire to start something new, to create. I felt empowered. The woman next to me reached over and touched my elbow. “I’m so sorry,” she said gently. “We had no idea, Ms. Liz,” said a voice from the back. “Thank you for sharing.”

I didn’t initiate the mood in that room, and I certainly wasn’t the first one to take a risk and reveal myself. But together, we’d inadvertently cultivated a kind of sanctuary by openly sharing what was at the heart of our individual experiences. The greatest reward for me was when Ms. F., in solidarity, set down her iPad, cracked a smile, and broke down a little bit herself.

“Liz,” she said, pounding the table with her fist, “that’s the line that got me, too! I saw it and was like, ‘Uh-uh, I can’t do this!’” As it turned out, she could. 🙄