

Sharing the Cockpit

Exploring the Art of Storytelling Through Collaborative Writing in the Classroom

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ONCE UPON A TIME, I imagined what it would be like to sit beside Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. as he wrote the words, “so it goes.” Or better yet, I wanted to hide inside his mind witnessing those twisted ironies spill onto the page. Where do writers come up with this stuff, I wondered, and how do they put their words together in a way that keeps us turning the pages? How do they do what they do? In more recent years, as a creative writing teacher, I was drawn to the idea of using collaborative writing in the classroom as a method of conveying all the things a writer must think about when crafting prose. It’s always better to show than tell.

So when I taught a course called “The Art of Crafting Fiction” in the summer of 2004 at Glendale (Arizona) Community College I asked the six students enrolled if they would like to try an experiment with me. I liked the manageable size of the group and wanted to see if writing a story together would be a better approach—a more hands-on way—to convey and work through the many elements of creating a story. I sensed the value of having our own shared story upon which to apply the principles of plot, character, place/setting, dialogue, voice, and conflict. What I didn’t know was, with too many pilots in the cockpit, so to speak, whether or not we could write a short story of any reasonable quality, or whether our craft would go into a tailspin and crash.

I found that this approach has been used by others, but not often. Last year I came upon a Web site of a writer who visits second graders and uses a simple formula and their ideas to write a one- or two-page children’s tale. Recently I also discovered that author Ken Kesey, together with thirteen M.F.A. students in the University of Oregon’s creative writing program, spent a year collaborating on a full-length novel called *Caverns*, published in 1990. My own experiment with this approach took place in three courses I taught with student writers who were neither little kids nor accomplished grad students, but a mix of teenagers and adults.

On the first day of that summer class there were three teens, a retired high school English teacher, a woman with a Ph.D. in Business Administration, and another woman who apologized profusely when, because of her job, she had to drop the class after the first night. One of the teens, who should have been enrolled in an ESL class instead, was a 13-year-old from Hong Kong with only the most rudimentary skills in

English. She sat politely, and, once in a while, smiled at the appropriate times. In essence, the four other students and I crafted our story.

Two of the three times I taught the collaborative writing process, I started with an intriguing title to launch the story; the other time we began by fleshing out a character sketch. During that first class, I chose a title to appeal to the teens. Both my 13-year-old American student and the other teenager in the class, a 16-year-old, had submitted fantasy stories featuring dragons to apply to this workshop. In an attempt to

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engage them, I suggested we call our collaborative story, “The Dragon Tattoo.” The girls liked the name, and the others went along gracefully.

With every collaborative class I taught, I would begin each day with a discussion about one aspect of craft, and then apply that concept to our story-in-progress. I saw this as a major strength of the collaborative process: the sense of shared authorship in the unfolding story meant the con-

cepts of craft were never abstract, but directly relevant to our efforts. Having every student participate in the discussion of one story—especially one in which they all had a vested interest—allowed for a common base of discourse, an opportunity for everyone collectively to solve a problem, to arrive at an imaginative solution through joint brainstorming, or to invent something together that belonged to no one, but to everyone. Everyone, irrespective of ability, could be part of successfully authoring a story, at a quality level much higher than most could accomplish individually.

When we started “The Dragon Tattoo,” I imagined us creating a fantasy world. To my surprise, the story evolved into a plausible adventure featuring conventional realism. The class decided on a 15½-year-old protagonist who had a small dragon tattoo on her shoulder put there by her Navy father when she was very young. In order to find her long-absent father, the teen steals her aunt’s new VW Beetle and drives from Glendale, Arizona, to San Diego where she has recently learned that he is stationed.

In the collaborative writing process, the story will take surprising turns. As the teacher, wherever possible, I relinquish as many of the authorial decisions as makes sense. This is not to say that there were not poor ideas being suggested by the students (or me). Invariably, those in my classes exhibited a collective good sense to veto ideas that would subvert or alter the “well-being” of the story. For example, after establishing “The Dragon Tattoo” as realistic drama, the class rejected the suggestion by one of the teens to give the plot a fantasy twist late in the story. On the other hand, the students were quick to embrace any imaginative ideas that added vitality to our shared prose.

In between class sessions, I assigned specific small tasks to each of the students, such as identifying the towns in Arizona and California that our protagonist would pass through on her way to San Diego. I gave the retired English teacher the job of writing the section of prose where the teen discovers the letter that explains her father’s whereabouts. After each session, I would go home and cobble together the collective ideas

that we in the class had agreed on. We were already a few pages into the story when the retired teacher, who had solid skills as a writer, shared her short section. When she read this to the class, one problem was apparent to all. Specifically, the tone and voice of her prose was markedly different than the tone and voice established in what I had already written. (This same problem—an inconsistent authorial voice—was also noticeable in Kesey’s *Caverns*.)

When I would go home and work to honor the authorial decisions made by the class, I was still obligated to craft most sentences and many lines of dialogue. In class, due to time constraints, it was not possible to belabor every word chosen, or the construction of each paragraph. To keep our story moving forward, I had to make many minor authorial decisions and connect the dots of our story. After trying to share this duty with the retired English teacher, I realized what I consider to be a prerequisite for the collaborative short story process: one person must serve as the lead writer throughout. However, when the lead writer brings a newly written section into class, student critique and suggestions must be encouraged. This honors revision as part of the writing process and insures that authorship is truly shared. “The Dragon Tattoo” resulted in a suspenseful teen adventure story that all of us were proud to have created.

After that first semester, I viewed collaborative writing as akin to allowing the students to fly an airplane alongside a licensed pilot who shares the cockpit and turns over the controls, not for take off and landing or heavy turbulence, but for as often as it made sense. With only six people in that initial Glendale Community College summer class, writing a story together worked as hoped. For the beginning students, the process allowed them to see the most basic elements of composition at work, and at every level of ability, writing together forced a more overt articulation of the process and a systematic appreciation of how each element of craft must be considered in the shared prose.

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The next semester, this same course had six adults enrolled. To further experiment with the collaborative process, a fellow grad student in my creative writing M.F.A. program agreed to sit in as the lead writer. I still taught the sections on craft and discussed how these applied to our story-in-progress. This time, instead of beginning our short story with a title, Deb, the lead writer, chose to begin by having us create a specific lead character. With our protagonist and story called “Talia,” the class decided that she would be an 18-year-old ballerina in New York whose mother had escaped to America from the Soviet Union when she was a young girl. Talia struggles with her mother’s expectation that she one day join the New York City Ballet. In the story, Talia shocks her mother by looking to strike out in a different direction and forego her exceptional talent. Deb’s ability to lead the writing of “Talia” with her own distinct style and method demonstrates how replicable the collaborative process can be for any writing

teacher with a solid grounding in the craft of fiction and a willingness to accommodate the many authorial decisions of a group.

My most recent collaborative class was with a group of eighth-graders. With the constant give-and-take and exchange these classes require, I had always assumed that any collaborative class should have no more than twelve students participating. In

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this case, the class turned out to have twenty-four students. These were not remedial or advanced students, but very typical, pubescent, often hyper, intermittently imaginative 13- and 14-year-olds. For twenty-four sessions, I was a guest in this Mount Baker Middle School reading class. The group was ethnically mixed, with an equal number of boys and girls.

To launch our story, I decided to draw from our western Washington surroundings and set the story there. I chose to call our piece, “The Bramble.” I read to

them a short excerpt from local author Tom Robbins’ novel, *Still Life With Woodpecker*, where the blackberry vines are slowly swallowing the house in the story. I also shared an evocative section from Ken Kesey’s *Sometimes a Great Notion* where Hank Stamper, as a young teen, tunnels through a labyrinth of bramble vines to extricate three bobcat kittens from their den. I was fully expecting that these eighth-graders would choose to write a conventional adventure story where kids are rescued from a bramble, so naturally the teens decided on a full-blown fantasy tale where the blackberry thicket opens into a Tolkienesque world of the underground.

After a few fits and starts, the class decided that they wanted a 14-year-old protagonist to be accompanied not by a pesky younger sidekick, but by another 14-year-old. When one girl suggested that our heroes be twins, I applauded the idea. Then I suggested that these could be sister and brother. This, I thought, would appeal to both genders in the class. Also, as the lead writer in this public school setting, I had no inclination to tackle a gender-mixed teen story where any hint of romance might be involved. The idea of using fraternal twins kept me clear of this quagmire. Ultimately, the sibling loyalties and antagonisms, as well as the respective masculinity and femininity of the 14-year-old characters served our story very well.

The class as a whole was great about voting on the big decisions for the story. For example, after asking the students to generate ideas for what the twins will find beneath the bramble, they narrowed their list of possibilities. In their final vote, they chose to have the twins discover an old, abandoned VW hippie bus. Ironically, the students shocked me with this hippie idea. I no longer look the part and didn’t remotely suggest the concept to them, but, at that time, I was in the throes of writing my literary study called *The Hippie Narrative*.

The greatest challenge with twenty-four students concerned their behavior following brainstorming sessions. I would have the class divide into four groups to discuss

possibilities for where and how our story should develop. The percolation of ideas tended to be highly social and noisy, so reconvening order and focus afterwards was difficult. Their reading teacher, who left me with substitutes a few times, addressed this behavioral concern with them and also came up with an excellent suggestion for me. He recommended that the students, individually, spend fifteen minutes or so writing a specific scene or section of dialogue. Brainstorming worked great with smaller classes, but this quieter alternative was more effective in a class with so many kids. Each day, I would go home and read what they had written and try to extract as many of their suggestions as made sense. We would discuss these options in our next session. This helped our story morph into shape.

As with any class, this group had a few kids who were always raising hands and even lobbying for their pet ideas to be included in our story. This explains the underground gorilla. A short way into our story, I had them each write a scene where something significant must happen to the twins after they have discovered the VW bus deep beneath the bramble. As I read through the students' writing, nothing especially imaginative surfaced. Then I read a piece from a painfully shy boy who never raised his hand or said anything unless directly asked. Yet his work exhibited the best writing skills in the class. Here, he had the twin boy blow the air horn in the underworld beside the old bus. Once the horn blows, the boy's sister disappears.

Perfect, I thought. This would create unresolved conflict for our story. The mystical disappearance of the girl would drive the rest of our plot. How rewarding it was the next day to single out this quiet and well-behaved kid for his imagination and instincts as a young writer.

From that point forward, "The Bramble Bus" had its own impetus. The boy had to overcome huge glowing fish, fantastical gorillas, and hordes of day-glo ants so he might reunite with his sister. After that, on those days when I read our latest section in class, everyone stood and applauded our story. Their biggest ovation came when we finished. Collaboration works. We had all taken turns at the wheel and our magic bramble bus had taken flight. 

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EXCERPT

The Bramble Bus

By Scott MacFarlane, in collaboration with Robert Crosby's 8th Grade Reading Class, October/November 2005, at Mount Baker Middle School in Mount Vernon, Washington, (Beth Ashley, Principal).

I'M A SKATER AND A TWIN, which is cool, but in this case I was really stupid. I heard the noises in this really radical bramble, but my sister, Kiara, was stopped at the edge of where the tunnel wouldn't go any farther. The flashlight only shined into the total darkness, so we couldn't see how far it went and Kiara wouldn't stop talking so I could hear the dog she kept blabbering about so I reached into my duck hunting jacket and pulled out an air horn, just so I could hush her up. The air horn can't not that big, but the noise—you should hear how loud that horn is, especially all cooped up in a tunnel like that. Surprised me. It was way crazier than I expected, because normally I'd get such a kick outta scaring my sister like that, but this time it was totally dumb. I gotta admit, sometimes I can be so retarded.

The loud blast went off, then everything happened at once. Kiara screamed and the ground right there between us, right in the middle of her and me, started to split, started to rumble and Kiara jumped up and tripped sideways, but she was still screaming while she fell away from me and away from the edge of the tunnel into the blackness.

. . . She wasn't really falling straight down, but it was more like she was floating farther and farther away from shore, except that I know it wasn't water, 'cause I never heard the sound of a splash but I could see the speck of light getting farther and father away. . . .'

And when I screamed her name again, I didn't hear any answer from Kiara so I was totally freaked out. I couldn't see my sister, except for the tiniest speck of light, and that's when it happened. I'd never admit it to no one, but there was wet stuff rolling down my cheeks. . . .

Now, I couldn't tell at first what was glowing, but . . . when the light got really bright, I could see what it was: this old, beat-up, silver and black hippie bus. The microbus was shaped like a gel-cap and dangling right at the edge of that cliff with a weird green glow inside of it. . . .

"Kiara!" I yelled again, but when my voice was echoing and I looked beyond the cliff, I couldn't even see the speck of our flashlight.