Storytellers
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What I gained from the San Joaquin Valley Writing Project Summer Institute was an awareness of the *real* writing process. Good writing was no longer imagined to be something that just flowed effortlessly from people who had the "gift". Instead, good writing was the result of messy brainstorming, looming doubt, faith that one has something worth saying, blue collar work ethic, passion, and finally, a hashing out and hammering down of molten words and phrases in the way a blacksmith forges hot metals into something stable, formidable and hopefully useful.

The "usefulness" aspect of writing could not be underscored enough. Sure, writing fed the soul, but well-crafted writing was ultimately practical; it developed character, confidence and critical thinking. Good writing could get you into college and help you thrive there. Good writing could get you a job. Good writing was a worthwhile, practical skill to have under your belt. Moreover, scholastic writing was not just a literary affair, but more based in clear communication of ideas across all subjects.

Upon graduating from the SJVWP institute at Fresno State, I knew what I needed to do. I would invite all my future students to become writers because that was what they--what we all--needed to become better human beings.

This was in 2000, back in the turn of the century, when computers were not much on the scene, or if they were, they were relegated to a "lab" that students used for maybe one hour per week; so the writing process, in my classroom, took place primarily in spiral bound notebooks.   The computer, as far as instructional writing was concerned, was only associated only with finality, the end of the process, the publication. Students leaned their notebooks precariously alongside the monitor as they navigated Appleworks or Microsoft Word. They typed their hearts out for the designated hour and then printed out their work, stapled tit all together with a title page on the front and we walked them back to be hung on the classroom bulletin board.

The following year when a newly hired "computer technician" placed an equally brand new Emac on my desk, I laughed out loud. *What was I going to do with that thing?* The technician said something about being able to use the internet and take roll. An old school English teacher, satisfied with novels and spiral notebooks thank-you-very-much, I shrugged and let the thing sit for most of the year. It was a paperweight. I could not have known then that within ten years, my Language Arts position would transform into an English/Communications role at an all-digital school where every student was equipped with a Mac lap top. I could not have known then, at the turn of the century, how an Apple computer would profoundly alter and expand every aspect of the writing process in my classroom.

Now, it's 2012 and my 11th and 12th grade students access their lessons, not from anvil-like textbooks which need to be stored away and re-adopted every 6 years, but from Mac laptops. They log on to the social networking Ning site where everyone in the class is "friends" with one another in the manner of Facebook. They chime in on discussion threads after following links to online articles, short stories and poems. They do daily journal entries on Google Docs and share them with me via email. In fact the students and I do quite a bit of conversing through email:

Student: *How was your weekend Mr. C?*
Me: *like every weekend...too short lol :)*
Student: *Can I use the restroom?*
Me: *Don't you mean "May I"*
Student: *Aaaah! May I!*
Me: *Sure go ahead*

Somehow we are all writing, all communicating in a mysterious wireless, high-tech way and yet there is something very natural, ancient, essentially human about all of this. Often I wonder what's going on here? Have we all become robotic? The world has surely changed too much...but then I realize that we're all just people: reading, brainstorming, churning around ideas and hanging out. As a matter of fact, we're becoming writers.

In a wireless, cyber savvy classroom, the possibilities, and the distractions, are endless. I roll out a project, get them into group. It's assignment time and the students must stay on task. I'm paid to keep everyone working.

Me: *We're at work guys we're not playing video games. Open up a new Google Doc. We are on a memory walk now...Write about your first dog, an accident, a favorite article of clothing you used to wear...*

We talk awhile and tell stories. I tell them about the favorite Felix the Cat shirt my mom bought me; the one I ripped on a nail in my tree fort when I was five.

Student: *Who's Felix the Cat?*
Me: *Look it up...*
Student: *Hey...electronic television broadcasting began with Felix the Cat in 1928.*
Another Student: *It says, they used to use his image instead of a real actor because the lights were too hot for a person to stand there while they adjusted the quality of the transmitted picture to get the best definition.*
Another Student: *Mr. C you were alive in 1928?*
Me: *Yep...born right when WWI broke out.*

They are all checking out images of Felix but now it's time to write. They are writing for 8 minutes on each topic. When time's up they "share" with others in their group using Google Docs capabilities. They make suggestions and comment on each other's work. I invite them to read aloud and some do. The stories make us laugh, fall silent, then laugh some more. All they had to do was click a "share" button in Google Docs and instant writing communities were created. Now they can comment, edit, make revision suggestions on each other's work. It's peer-editing in the 21st century.

Ok, they've read and commented on each others work and socialized for about 20 minutes, now it's time to pick one of the three 8 minute reflections they wrote and revise it into a final 500 word piece.

Me: *The rubric is posted on the Ning so just follow those guidelines*

We are deep in the revision process. We are busting the myth that writing is this stoic, isolated, lonely pursuit. Actually, it's somewhat loud in here...Nah, it's REALLY loud in here, even

disruptive by traditional standards, but as I march around the room the way teachers are paid to do, MacBook in hand, I notice that lots of words and phrases are being typed so there's no need to spoil it all by hollering at everyone to BE QUIET.

At the end of the class, they all digitally share their final work with me. I check out my Google Docs cue and announce who has turned their work in and who has not.

Me: *Keegan where's your narrative?*
Keegan: *Oh...can I send it to you tonight?*
Me: Yeah...but get it to me by the end of lunch if you want full credit.

Now all the docs are shared with me and I can make comments and editing suggestions before the next class meeting. My comments are immediately present on their document because we are "collaborators" and they have shared their doc with me.

Next class they open their docs and see my comments, make final edits and revisions and then post to the social network Ning site where their classmates can read and make additional comments...

Cool Story ...I used to live in Las Vegas   One time I broke both my legs in a jeep accident... your dog was the best. The description of the horse race really made it seem like I was there...Yeah I could smell the manure...I didn't understand the part about your grandma....why did she carry that plastic bag of your baby hair in her coat pocket?

We've finalized, right? We're digitally published, good to go; but wait! There's more:

Me: *We going to podcast our work now...get your final pieces out. Open up Garage Band. Record your "memory walk" in your own voice on one track and then add fitting music on another track. The music should match the mood of your writing.*

Wow, we're back to the editing process again. While recording--out in the hallway, in the corner of a room, beneath a tiny tent made of a hoodie, they stumble over words, record it over, listen back, cut out the last part, cue in the last paragraph, get it the way they want it. Edit, revise, edit, revise, engaging with syntax without even knowing it. Two sisters, identical twins, come up and ask, *Can we record our voices reading each other's work?*

Me: *Hmm...can't see any reason why not.*

Some are struggling with the program: *how do you do track ducking? How do you end the podcast? What is a podcast? I can't remember how to do this!*

Me: Jim, Alyssa...Can you give them a hand with that?

Jim and Alyssa: Sure.

When the podcasts are done, they "share" them to ITunes and upload the files to the Ning social network. Now it's time to listen to them all. Just kick back, close your eyes and listen to the stories. But first, I hook in to the digital projector, access YouTube and show the class a clip of an old gray haired Native American man telling a creation story...

Storyteller: *The first world was as black as black wool, it had four corners and over these appeared four clouds which were black, white, yellow and blue...*

He pauses to play his drum and rattle...flute notes rise in the background.

Student: *Hey! That's exactly what we're doing; telling stories with music*

Me: *Yeah, it's old fashioned storytelling for sure, but we did it with Apple computers and Google docs and Garage Band and all that.*

Another Student: That's Crazy

Another Student: *No...That's IRONIC*

Some things, it seems, never change. We listen to the Navajo creation myth and a few podcasts and call it a day.