Student Voice and Narrative Writing as Key Factors for Planning Lessons in the English Language Arts Classroom

Rick Jetter, Ph.D.

Western New York Maritime Charter School

Buffalo, NY

Abstract

Teacher created lessons have historically and exclusively been an adult professional responsibility. The outcomes of our lessons are determined by student learning and achievement, including feedback about lesson delivery with hopes of having positive results for both students and the overall school program. As teachers design lessons within a silo-mentality, while ignoring student voice and input in the initial process of creating lessons, post-lesson feedback from students may or may not even be sought as a formative measurement for gauging the success of a lesson. I contend that student engagement and learning increases when student voice is activated through narrative responses as part of the lesson planning process *before* instruction is ever delivered. Using a grounded theory research methodology including 25 student participants in an urban Grade 9 English Language Arts classroom, an authentic lesson planning partnership between teacher and students existed and led to highly engaged learners.

Rick Jetter *is a national educational consultant, author, speaker, and Grade 9 English Teacher at Western New York Maritime Charter School. He has written various books in the field of education including the highly acclaimed Let Them Speak! and is one of a small group of scholars working on the intricate links between student voice, identity, and narrative theory research for improving instructional and school reform initiatives.*

Contact Information:

485 Ashford Ave.

Tonawanda, NY 14150

716.860.0380

drjetter1@gmail.com

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Establishing a Need for Student Voice

The importance of student voice has been emphasized by scholars for years including the important work of Quaglia (2014), Fletcher (2017), and even dating back to Dewey's (1916) intentions for conceiving democratic schools and society for supporting learning in its most purest social form which can certainly be extrapolated into student voice input. The argument for activating student voice is complex because there are levels of student voice implementation—some of which are misunderstood as a way to justify school change and reform. Student voice is often distorted because it can still be controlled by adults unless a true partnership breaks down the barriers of slotting adults and students into different respective duties and tasks versus the multi-functional processes that govern the planning, instruction, and assessment of student learning. Instead of planning *for* students, we should be planning *with* students and, therefore, we should not view student voice input as a form of "treason." Instead, it should be considered "healthy treason" which is a first step towards perceiving the adult/student partnership in any area of schooling (Coda & Jetter, 2018, p. 26).

Passive instructional planning approaches, charging that student voice was activated, are sometimes utilized by adults in order to appease students or the community at large into thinking that student voice was gathered for positive input and impact when, in the end, no such attempts to carry out the utilization of student interests ever existed. I argue that student voice should be part of a teacher's full educational program including lesson planning, preparation, and construction because of the

benefits that are incurred for increasing student buy-in, engagement, and the growth or conception of democratic partnerships between adults and students.

Narratives as Meaningful Artifacts

If we agree that student voice is important, our next step is to validate the significance of gathering narrative artifacts as part of the student voice activation process. Narratives act as a vehicle for social contexts to come alive in the classroom, and, in this case, to better understand lesson planning, which Bruner (1990) would identify as social activities that intertwine "thinking [and writing] . . . that which are experience-based" (p. 153). Experiences are highlighted through narratives because they lay the bricks for better understanding that can be captured by text and later utilized by social communities for greater analysis of our experiences.

In this study, students wrote down their responses to simple prompted questions so that they may engage in authentic writing for a purpose. These questions are outlined in the next section. According to Perl (2007), we need to apply a new kind of criteria for analyzing narratives: "Good stories strive to use relational language and narrative styles to create a purposeful dialogue between readers and the author. It teaches through its manner of expression as well as through its claims about the world" (Perl, 2007, pp. 307-308). As a result, the use of narratives in this study are twofold: 1.) Students use narratives to *report* something and 2.) Students use narratives to *express* something. Both are useful in considering ways in which criteria lend themselves to the deep analysis of planning tasks and lesson activities.

The written narratives gathered in this study also provided artifacts which can be shared with other members of the school community. Moving from oral responses to

written responses and with a series of 50 narratives that were collected just for this study alone (25 written responses per lesson), the narratives provided an archive that can be used for other venues, such as school board presentations, teacher in-service training and professional development in the area of student voice, continued research, and further implementation. Narratives become "zones for agentive possibilities" (Wortham, 2001, p. 9) because they are filled with "languages, codes, theories, ideologies, and methodologies for others to learn about and understand (Schaafsma and Vinz, 2007, p. 277). In this regard, this study considers some powerful passages excerpted from the 50 longer narratives so that the analysis for our discussion can be more succinct, but highly relevant and impactful.

There is a greater good that narratives instill within us and within our communities according to Clandinin (2006): "School landscapes shape, more or less, educative possibilities for building relational places out of which new stories mindful of families, children, teachers, and principals can be negotiated and lived out" (p. 111). This research study supports Clandinin's work by illustrating how cooperative planning is the key negotiated place that will either bring together or sever the student/teacher relationship in the classroom whether it is explicit or implicit.

The Study

I selected two random lessons in January 2019 and February 2019 as a result of low student interest and explored two key issues: 1.) The relevance of a lesson to students' lives and 2.) The ability for students to tackle controversial issues. I constructed lesson #1 and then randomly selected a group of students to participate in a discussion about how to make each lesson better. Lesson #2 was constructed by me

and my students, only. I utilized their narrative responses to further prove that after-the-fact feedback should have taken place before the lesson was constructed so student feedback was interwoven throughout the planning stages, discussion stages, and formative collection stages of each lesson and at the end of each lesson.

Lesson #1 involved a freewrite regarding a quotation taken from Dr. Wayne Norton and Lesson #2 involved analyzing the "N-word" in Steinbeck's classic American novel, *Of Mice and Men*.

Students analyzed each lesson using the following simple set of questions (prompts) by writing responses rather than having a discussion that may or may not have been accurately captured fully and completely without the transcription of their narrative collection methods. The simple questions provided to students include

1. What did you *connect with* the most regarding this lesson?

2. What *problems* did you have with this lesson?

3. How might you make this lesson *better*?

While a discussion about these key points did take place, the narratives were collected, first, in order to be used as a reference for more concrete thinking, writing, and participation as we analyzed the lesson outcomes together in order to better craft a new set of lessons that certainly improved student engagement and participation based on their feedback.

Lesson #1: Uncovering Freewriting Relevance through a Quote

I presented a picture of a mask submerged in water with a quote by Dr. Wayne Norton: "In a world where masks are worn, it is a privilege to see a soul" and then asked

students to write down what this quote meant to them. Students were given two minutes to freewrite in order to flush out their conscious minds of anything related to this quote. Please note that students were trained in the freewriting process since the start of the school year and knew the tenets of freewriting guidelines including no rules, write anything that comes to mind, keep the pen or pencil moving even if it leads to a place where you think is "nowhere," and write until "time" is called.

After the freewrite was completed, student responses included the following questions (tabulated by the number of students who responded in a similar fashion to this exercise):

1. Who is Dr. Wayne Norton? (17 out of 25 students)

2. Why was the mask submerged in water? What does water have to do with this quote? (15 out of 25 students)

3. What is "soul"? Does "soul" refer to music or the state of being? (14 out of 25 students)

4. What does the word "privilege" mean? (14 out of 25 students)

As the task advised students to write about what this quote meant to them, you can see that a large number of students had contextualized vocabulary questions or misunderstandings. Many were also hyper-focused on the *name* of the author of the text (which was unfamiliar to them and created a barrier for learning). Next, a focus on the background artistic rendering of the quote with a mask submerged in water was a cause for concern. All of these responses detracted from true student engagement in

so many ways and could have been planned for if student voice was activated prior to this lesson being carried out—which I will outline in the next section.

Student Voice & Narrativized Recommendations

A group of nine random students from my class shared their feelings about the lesson and provided insights into making the lesson more effective. Below, you will find a list of the top insights according to my students' narrative responses:

1. "Why didn't you tell us the meaning of words before we saw them just in case some of us didn't know them?"

2. "Why didn't you place the quote on a plain slide so images did not interfere with the textual task at hand?"

3. "Why didn't you share a little bit about the author before we saw a name that we did not identify with so it did not detract us from analyzing the text?"

I utilized students' recommendations through the use of student voice and narrative collections to conceive a new lesson given days later with a Kanye West quote that students enjoyed much more. The quote was placed on a plain brown background with the following quote by Kanye West accompanied by his picture: "My greatest pain in life is that I will never be able to see myself perform live."

As eight random students were brought into the planning of this lesson, students recommended reviewing who Kanye West was in case someone did not know who he was. They also recommended a quick review about the difference between literal and figurative language that they learned back in September but felt the need for a refresher

even if we have talked about figurative language on many occasions throughout the school year. Finally, my students felt that it was necessary for me to show them how to freewrite on the document camera using a different task so that they could visibly see how I flushed out my own mind about anything ranging from an object to a quote to a different textual passage. One of my students suggested that I take off my shoe, place it on a table, and then model freewriting on the document camera for 2 minutes highlighting the question, "What does this shoe mean to me?"

These student recommendations are actually highly intelligent, creative, and they capture the art and science of teaching, AND these insights were gathered from my students because I provided an opportunity for my students and me to talk about lesson creation, lesson planning, and how to help them become better learners and more powerful thinkers. My students gave me some things to think about in order to get them more engaged in the lesson and make my teaching better than it would have been if I had planned it alone in my own teacher silo.

This partnership led to the following outcomes which were tabulated from the narratives written by students when I asked for their feedback about the lesson in addition to their freewrites about the content and literary text-to-self task:

1. "I liked how Kanye West was quoted." (23 out of 25 students)

2. "I'm glad we reviewed figurative language. I get it mixed up sometimes." (18 out of 25 students)

3. "The image was bold and not complicated." (12 out of 25 students)

4. "I was able to think about my life because I knew something about Kanye West, already." (8 out of 25 students)

5. "I liked the way Dr. Jetter did a freewrite about his shoe because I saw how he related it to his life." (21 out of 25 students)

While these responses represent only a sample of the total arsenal of narrative responses collected, having my students assist in the planning of the lesson clearly increased their engagement levels. Because my students' voices were accessed and utilized on issues that we think are only adult issues (i.e. lesson planning), a better lesson was delivered the second time around because my students were part of the planning process.

Lesson #2: Establishing the Historical Context for the "N-word" in *Of Mice and Men*

This lesson was pre-planned with a random group of eight students before the delivery of instruction took place. The task focused on Chapter 2 of *Of Mice and Men* where Steinbeck begins to characterize Candy (who was nameless at the onset of the novel) and the Boss (who would be later introduced in the chapter). Crooks would soon enter the chapter and be the locus of the discussion referring to the "N-word."

To help students understand characterization and to encourage their own visualization of character development, I used chapter two in *Of Mice and Men*. This chapter is where the "N-word" first appears in *Of Mice and Men* and students asked how to approach this textual reality.

Pre-planning brainstorms invited narrative responses which surveyed these two key questions:

1. "How will we tackle the discovery of the "N-word" in the book?"

2. "What can we do to help students learn about the usage of the "N-word" in the book?"

3. "How do we make students more comfortable with seeing the "N-word"?"

Students vigorously wrote down their ideas with the exception of two students who did not know what to do or have any advice about what to do--which is actually a fine result for this study because it demonstrates that the activation of student voice does not always mean that there are "right" answers out there for the picking. What educators can do by learning about this experience is to simply open up the discussion about our planning which could help us arrive at different creative plans or capacities of building more meaning for our students even if some of our students do not feel that they have immediate solutions. Student voice is not a "wrong" or "right" outcome; it is a means to a better outcome.

What my students did recommend was a brief consideration of historical context, especially the Great Depression and the history of lynchings. They also recommended that we ask for volunteer readers rather than me reading the chapter out loud to the class (as a white male).

My students and I also collectively tried out a Boggle word scramble activity during one particular class using the letters (g-r-i-n-e-g) which would most likely reveal the "N-word" after many attempts to create 2-3-or-4 letter words, first. This game eventually became a discussion platform for how the word was used offensively in the past and continues to be used offensively today. This exercise also led to the

observation that although Steinbeck created racist characters who reflected society's views on race during that period, we could not conclude Steinbeck had racist views himself based on his use of the "N-word" in this novel. These activities better prepared students for their encounter with the "N-word" than if I simply had addressed the issue myself without their input.

Student Voice & Narrativized Outcomes

Take a look at the variety of powerful student responses gathered through narrativized (and archived) writing in order to better understand the power behind planning *with* students instead of *for* students:

1. "I liked the word jumble. It revealed the "N-word" before we entered into the book." (17 out of 25 students)

2. "I liked the reference to the Civil Rights Movement which came decades later. It helped me to understand history better and how the "N-word" was used." (18 out of 25 students)

3. "I liked how Raphael and Darby (pseudonyms) read out loud. It made it easier for me because they are black and I am white and if I read the "N-word," I would have died." (13 out of 25 students, 7 of which were white students)

4. "I liked how Dr. Jetter talked about using an abbreviated term, "the N-word" versus reading the entire word, verbatim, if students did not feel comfortable. It was a choice not a mandate." (19 out of 25 students)

5. "It was good that we talked about the "N-word" before we saw it on the pages of the book. It wasn't a big deal when we saw it as a reference to a character, named Crooks." (22 out of 25 students)

These narrative responses are the result of a partnered planned lesson between me and my students. I sought student voice and feedback, and collected their narrative ideas about planning the lesson. Therefore, the narrative responses of the class afterwards became the type of living and breathing texts that illustrate their voices and identities as they lived with and through the instructional process.

Findings

Relevance to Students

Most importantly, if students are to think about their own lives through the context of a quote, meme, or image, including textual analysis, we cannot always expect them to know everything about such story crafting or textual work. Students will go through their entire lives not knowing everything about a task, historical concept, or context-based learning heuristic. And, we should not walk away from this study thinking that students must always know such contexts (and if they don't, it is our job to always create text-to-self contexts). But we can actually plan to have a discussion about the author of any text before it is revealed to the students.

Therefore, this study revealed something extremely interesting about its construct: Students were more engaged by a modern-day link to their lives which was revealed through an incredibly invigorating discussion about the difference between their knowledge of and the discussion about the differences between their knowledge of Dr. Wayne Norton and Kanye West. I did not anticipate that the name of the author

would be a significant barrier to student engagement. Therefore, I did not preemptively

create a plan for student voice activation. Instead, it was through student voice and

narrative response collections that students entered into a task and came out with

different points about their arrival of understanding—all of which were useful to the

discussion that ensued for the entire class. The name of the author created confusion,

but this became a learning point where students prepared me to use this new

knowledge for future reference if similar activities were planned alongside students in

the English Language Arts classroom.

While all academic activities that students experience, such as written

examinations and college papers, will not create relevance to a student's life, skill-

building in my classroom, by using student voice and collecting narrative responses,

most certainly created a larger learning context. that I did not identify with, exclusively

and solely, as the teacher. It wasn't until student voice was activated that I learned to

improve my lessons by co-planning with my students, giving them a "taste-test" of

learning before learning was finally executed. As student engagement in the Kanye

West quote increased, so did the engagement about the discussion of either unknown

or anonymous authors and this new teacher knowledge provided by the students in

order to teach *for* my students, was arrived at through a true planning partnership *with*

my students.

Confronting Controversial Topics

Some of my colleagues delicately dance around the use of the "N-word" in *Of*

Mice and Men and worry about how students will work through such a difficult topic. My

students were different, however. As I hesitated to massage this topic and was worried

about how my diverse classroom would handle this lesson, they actually executed an incredibly high level of student engagement, so much so that they volunteered to read passages from the text out loud for the class to learn and more about the historical context.

It was through the activation of student voices that I learned how to massage this lesson into a highly impactful platform of historical contexts and an amazingly rich discussion about the use of the "N-word" across history, the use of the word today, and the conversational forms of the "N-word" that my students use with one another, bringing about a highly informative discussion with participation from all students joining together for deeper cultural awareness.

If students picked up a copy of *Of Mice and Men* and read it on their own, they would obviously encounter the "N-word" individually, perhaps privately, perhaps unknowingly, and perhaps, without the context of history and its usage of the word during such a time period and, of course, outside of this time period. What I learned through co-planning with my students was that my apprehensions of tackling the "N-word" and subsequent plan to address it had far greater effects on student learning and engagement because my students told me that it would be OK. They told me that if I ignored the word or tried to gloss over it, they would have wondered why, especially without receiving any framework to aid their understanding. They preferred bringing forth the issues, at hand, within what is considered to be a classic piece of literature. Seeking student voice activation for guidance and input about how to move forward and analyze such an important piece of literature was incredibly powerful for both me and my students.

I am not asserting that I would have ignored the use of the "N-word" during my own planning. That would be professionally and culturally irresponsible on my part. What I am asserting is that my students guided me to look at the lesson differently and not to boldly ignore the word or recklessly use it without proper pre-planning that would be relevant to them and not only relevant to me as the teacher. The Boggle game-like unscrambling of the word led students to a greater appreciation of the word's historical context and therefore to a deeper understanding of the text. The activation of student voice during the planning stages of this lesson was vital to my own learning and professional reflection as a current practitioner. I understand that next year's class might be at a different spot than this year's class, so I will assume that getting *their* feedback before this lesson is possibly repeated will be essential--as the use of *Of Mice and Men* will most likely be part of my 9th grade curriculum once again.

Conclusions

Through my own research and work with student voice, narrative theory, and notions of identity for both students and educators, one thing that stands out is the social and collective nature of ideas generated by students and adults, creating a marketplace where teaching and learning becomes more powerful and engaging for all.

If we consider lesson planning to be strictly an adult responsibility, we will then we will miss so many important lesson features and proactive tactics or strategies for increasing learning and student engagement. If we instead create a partnership between students and adults, we might not always find what we are looking for, but we will increase the potential for success because our students know more than we often give them credit for---including in areas we strive to exclusively own ourselves.

Pluses

There were many victories that took place because of this study—both personally and professionally. First, student input was incredibly helpful and constructive for greater lesson success, producing a level of engagement greater than I could have imagined. A learner-centered environment was established, trust between students and teacher increased, and voices were heard. Students were co-planners, co-pilots on the aircraft of their own learning. Students felt a deeper appreciation regarding their role in the classroom which turned out to be a powerful ingredient to the continued transformation of our relationship.

Secondly, students had opportunities to write about how they felt about the lessons, what they thought could be improved, and how they might have approached things differently. While it would be incredibly laborious to include all fifty narratives for both lessons, the greatest findings were shared in a transcribed and tabulated fashion. These tabulations show incredible growth outcomes from both Lesson #1 and Lesson #2 and in two different areas of focus: relevance to students and confronting controversial topics. I am especially proud to report, within this study, that student voice and the narrative collection of student voices *did* have a variety of positive outcomes in so many ways. It validates the body of work regarding student voice and narrative collection of student voices.

Potentials

Last year, while co-writing and publishing *Let Them Speak! How Student Voice Can Transform Your School*, there was an immense collection of student narratives which were included in our book and assisted in the validity of our work. What I found

most invigorating was the new practical knowledge I gained by returning to the English 9, ELA classroom, in an urban setting, to compile and collect new research to supplement my theoretical platform. Such an experience has provided me with a greater hyper-focused understanding of the day-to-day demands placed on teachers and the importance of planning and delivering instruction while having a keen eye on the importance of creating incredibly positive relationships with students at all times.

This study has the potential to spread into English Language Arts classrooms across the nation AND in the classrooms of other disciplines, as well. While the mini-research nature of this study might seem minute to some, it has the incredible potential to add innovation to teaching due to the complex structure of our craft and the complex methods by which we include students in the planning of lessons. Teaching and learning should be a collective craft between students and educators, not OUR craft, alone. If we can get past our own egos as educators, we will include students in the process of creating instruction *with* them, and not *for* them.

Limitations

The limitations of this study to both the researcher and practitioner are varied and need to be acknowledged for greater transparency regarding the efficacy of this work. While I will continue to be an advocate for including student voice and using narratives to act as a megaphone for student interests that can become artifacts for other educators to use and learn from, I did not include the vast collection of narratives, nor did I use individualized student names (in pseudonyms) when gathering student responses for your review. For the sake of being concise, I transcribed common issues and responses for review.

This might appear to be a limitation to some. However, the exact nature of this study is so important that the best way to bring forth a calling for further research is to grab and hold on to anything that we can and send it out for consideration and review. All of the daily parts of education that we engage in should collectively assist the whole.

Next, I did not report on the racial statistics that could have contributed to a deeper discussion about Lesson #2. I believe that could be saved for larger studies regarding race, discourse, and literature studies. I also reported on a study consisting of 25 students out of the larger 109 students that I currently teach. Such a microstudy might be considered unreliable or invalid. Yet, the narratives in this study are *real,* and the lesson outcomes from my students' voices are *real* and *important.* They were incredibly essential to this discussion.

Finally, this study consists of only two lessons in *one* English Language Arts classroom in *one* urban school, in *one* city, and in *one* state. Yet, the results are highly interesting and compel me to where to go from here.

Next Steps

There is a greater calling for all educators to bring students into the lesson planning process, to ask simple questions about what could work better, and to value students as *partners* in the lessons that we typically think are only adult-laden responsibilities. Such a study can be replicated in *any* classroom at *any* grade level, and in *any* subject area. Until we value the role of students as partners, we will continue to miss so many things that might seem small to us, but can emerge as huge life-changing issues for our students. If we create a scaffolded system of grade level inclusion of student voice and narrative collection, we will have a comprehensive PK-12

system that values student voice and leads to greater engagement for tasks which have historically been set up, protected by, and carried out by the adults, exclusively and alone.

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