

(Excerpted from *Teaching Tolerance in the Classroom* 3-day Seminar presented to Palestinian and Israeli Educators, at the Peace Palace in Larnica, Cyprus)

Stories/Life Narratives

by

Ann Weiss

Personal Narratives:

We can learn much from the personal stories that people write:

how they view others, and how they view themselves, and also  
how they view their own place in their environment.

Today we are going to do three things:

1-We are going to talk about narratives.

2-We are going to look at some specific narratives:

the ones on Tolerance and Forgiveness submitted by our participants, and

3-We are going to develop some guidelines and principles for how to teach about  
narratives and ways to use narratives in the classroom.

At the end of the conference, we have been asked to share these principles with the other  
groups. So as ideas come to you, jot them down.

Ideas for teaching narratives

Ideas for integrating narratives into the classroom curriculum

When someone is writing a personal narrative---which is a story about their own life---  
they are revealing something about themselves.

Sometimes it is very big---what they believe, the core issues of their life  
(Family, Religion, Ethics, Politics)

Sometimes it is very small---a little event that doesn't seem very important.

But whatever they write in a narrative, in some way, they are answering the question:  
Who Am I? This is a question of their identity.

*Facing History and Ourselves*, a superb teaching organization based in Massachusetts,  
suggests that students create an Identity Chart. Here is an example, to show what I mean.

*Create Identity Chart for yourself. Who are you?*

Mother	Wife	Teacher
Writer	Me	Photographer
American	Italian (born)	Friend

*Share elements of the Identity Chart:* Self  
Family  
Work

Country  
Religion  
Who you are in relation to other people

A- Have students/self write about their own experiences (happy/sad, good/bad, experiences when they felt pain or gained insights or remembered something of significance to them in some other way,  
to clarify issues for themselves.

This is private writing, almost like a personal journal

[Teachers Note: The teacher's role here is to help to direct students and help focus their thoughts, but not to be too interventionist].

Students give examples for (and with) teachers:

Describe yourself to yourself.

Describe an event when you felt proud, or scared, or hopeful, or angry.

Describe a time when you learned something about other people, about other cultures, about yourself. Something good/something not so good.

These same topics, which can be used for personal writing---that is, only to be seen by student---can also be used for shared writing, that is, shared with teacher and other students.

B. Personal Narratives Shared with Others.

Why share?

1-To clarify issues for others, help them understand your thinking, even help them understand you better as a person.

2-By sharing narratives with others (students with teacher, students with other students, students with family, own community, politicians, people in other communities), the Other can act as a mirror for the students' own thoughts.

Question

Extend the thought

Probe more deeply what the student feels and thinks

Share thoughts with the other, and in so doing, both participants are more fully developed in their thinking.

C. Another type of personal narrative is one which highlights a topic.

Tolerance

Conflict in classroom

Social Justice/Injustice in the classroom (not political, but person to person) or

Injustice / Justice in the family, school, community, country, world

Frame the topic in the smaller setting first/then move to the larger setting of world

D. Letters to the Other

Writing letters to the Other---Greeks to Turks, Turks to Greeks, Muslims to Jews, Jews to Muslims---whomever you consider ‘the Other.’

What is the purpose of these letters?

To rant and rave about all that is wrong? Maybe, but then there will be no chance for better understanding.

To write about what one feels and suffers, what one hopes and understands, what one does NOT understand---then there is some possibility for change, if not in action, then at least in attitude.

If you do this exercise with your students, and if you want to do a REAL EXCHANGE of letters, I will try to find classrooms in the Other community, to receive them and respond to your students.

Imagine---this could be the beginning of a new understanding of the one who has historically been the Other, in both directions---that we understand Them better, and that They better understand Us.

Eventually, the hope and the aim is that there is no “Other,” but rather that all people become “We,” not “Us” & “Them.” Toward that end, as a final progression of teaching narratives in the classroom, if and only if it seems appropriate, let the student try to stand in the shoes of the Other.

#### E. Narrative of Being the Other

It is very important that this be done carefully, and done only where it can be done with a positive outcome. Many classes and teachers can never come to this point, where they step in the shoes of the one who has been their enemy. If there is a possibility to do this in a positive way, then it is a highly evolved and transforming exercise. If it cannot be done in a positive way, then it can be very destructive---and should be avoided altogether.

What is the key? Seeing that we have much more in common as human beings than we have different.

Example: The Mother is a School [This is a specific narrative shared with me when I taught a 3-day seminar on ‘Teaching Tolerance in the Classroom.’

#### Analysis of Specific Narratives

What can we learn about the person from the narrative?

Sophie Freud Loewenstein. The Passion and Challenge of Teaching

I learned from my children. They taught me to grow up.

They taught me to stay young.

“As a teacher, I have been forced continually to examine my values and ideas because I must state them clearly and defend them well. My acts and words are both very

visible. As a model to my students, I must live by the values that I teach. Above all, teaching is a way of sharing myself, of making an impact on the world, of making my intellectual and political contribution to society.” (SFL, p.15).

Begin with the student. And also end with the student.

[Except when noted otherwise, all South African references, below, come from Bill Moyers’ *Facing the Truth* documentary on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, just as ‘FH’ indicates that the source is Facing History. AW is Ann Weiss].

Use these ideas to inform your thinking, guide your discussion with and among students:

Deborah Tannen: We all know we are unique individuals but we tend to see others as representatives of groups. It’s a natural tendency since we must see the world in patterns in order to make sense of it.

Stereotype is more than a judgment about an individual based on the characteristics of the group. Stereotyping reduces individuals to categories. FH

Steve Biko, South African leader of Black Consciousness movement, killed in police custody in 1977: A people without a positive history is like a vehicle without an engine.

\*\*\*At Biko’s funeral, Desmond Tutu, then bishop of Lesotho: True reconciliation is a deeply personal matter. It can happen only between persons who assert their own personhood and who acknowledge and respect that of the others. You don’t get reconciled to your dog, do you?

\*\*\*Martha Minow, professor of law: When we identify one thing as unlike the other, we are dividing the world; we use our language to exclude, to distinguish---to discriminate.

Martin Luther King, Jr. “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

\*\*\*Nelson Mandela: *It was clear to me that a military victory was a distant if not impossible dream. It simply did not make sense for both sides to lose thousands if not millions of lives in a conflict that was unnecessary. It was time to talk.*

What kind of courage does it take to talk? FH  
To listen? AW

What do their stories reveal about the ways memory and identity are linked?

\*\*\*Ervin Staub: *Bystanders play a critical role in every society. They define the meaning of events and move others toward empathy or indifference. They can promote values and norms of caring, or by their passivity of participation in the system, they can affirm the perpetrators.*

Nobel Laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who chaired the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa for 2 years:

*We needed to acknowledge that we had a horrendous past.  
The past has a way of returning to you. It doesn't go and lie down quietly.  
Our capacity for evil is great. We were festering. It was necessary to open the wound to  
pour in a balm. It will be a long process, but it will be a true healing.*

*My humanity is bound up in your humanity---ubuntu.*

Bill Moyers, documentary film maker: *We can learn from South Africa that the past need not hold us hostage any longer.*

Don Mattera, South African poet: *Sorry is not just a word; it's a deed. It is an act. We are responsible for the future*

Robert Coles: The Call of Stories

*Be aware of your questions. You ask what you want to know.*

Robert Connell (Australian Educator): Regardless of class, or degree of power or powerlessness,

*"The link between family and school cannot be understood if it taken just at one point of time. Each family has a history, each school has a history, and so does the connection between them."*(Connell, Making the Difference, 1982, p.42.)

Sophie Freud Loewenstein. The Passion and Challenge of Teaching:

*I learned from my children. They taught me to grow up.  
They taught me to stay young.*

*"As a teacher, I have been forced continually to examine my values and ideas because I must state them clearly and defend them well. My acts and words are both very visible. As a model to my students, I must live by the values that I teach. Above all, teaching is a way of sharing myself, of making an impact on the world, of making my intellectual and political contribution to society."* (SFL, p.15).

Sam Keen: Who is the author of your story?

Whenever I teach, together with whatever else I am teaching, whatever else I am trying to accomplish, there is a single focus in my mind—and that focus is the student. How can what I'm teaching help to advance the student's search for his/her own personhood? How can I empower the student to discover the life he or she is meant to live, or to paraphrase Sam Keen, to become 'the author of their own story?'

Finally, whenever I teach, and whatever I teach, I let one principle be my guide: Begin with the student. And also end with the student. *Ann Weiss*