Speak, Memory: Oral Storytelling in the High School Classroom

Christine Gentry

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ABSTRACT

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Student stories are a potentially rich natural resource running through the veins of our schools, but this resource sometimes goes untapped. One strategy teachers can use to take advantage of this resource is to formally introduce oral storytelling into the classroom—to explicitly teach students how to choose and craft stories from their lives and then allow them to publicly perform those stories. The Story Shop Community Education Program (a pseudonym) in New York City is a non-profit devoted to bringing the art and craft of oral storytelling to populations that might not otherwise have access to it through series of free workshops.

This research project took place over sixteen weeks of one such workshop at a Title I public high school in East New York, Brooklyn. It addresses the following question: How does an oral storytelling unit affect both individual students and their classroom relationships? More specifically, (1) How do individual students engage with an oral storytelling unit? (2) What is the perceived impact of an oral storytelling unit on classroom relationships? (3) How do students perceive the impact of an oral storytelling unit both on their understanding of themselves as individuals and on their relationships with each other? and (4) How does the teacher perceive the impact of an oral storytelling unit on her individual students and her classroom relationships?

Drawing on an interpretivist/social network approach and grounded in the tenets of narrative qualitative research, this project utilizes mixed methods to investigate whether an oral storytelling unit provided students with opportunities for growth in identity development and deepening of their classroom relationships. This investigation documents how granting students the time and space to bear witness to each other's lives and 'go public' with stories that could otherwise go unheard might improve classroom community and therefore student motivation.

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Dedication

For Dana Trusso and Karin Van Orman, who preserved my sanity…so many times.

Chapter 1: Why Speak?

Student stories are a potentially rich natural resource running through the veins of our schools, but this resource sometimes goes untapped. Students sit in our English classes and read other people's stories (which we call 'literature') about strangers from another time and place, they answer countless multiple-choice questions, and they write plenty of literary analysis essays, sometimes for teachers who value the products over the process. Though personal narrative writing is more common in classrooms now than it was when I was in school (in the eighties and nineties), some present-day students are rarely if ever given the chance to craft stories from their own lives. This is unfortunate, as adolescents are capable of such growth in self and social awareness: "Just at the age when they might bring rational understanding to bear on the significant stories of their own past…many adolescents stop writing stories at all" (Wanner, 1994, p. 8).

Students' voices are sometimes as strictly controlled as their pens. They might only speak to answer questions (perhaps with the stressful requirement to answer them correctly); they might only listen to the teacher's directions or to lists of facts they are expected to know for a test (Schank & Berman, 2007). As might be expected, the level of engagement, motivation, and community in classrooms like this is usually low, which can negatively affect academic achievement. Though public high school English teachers' classrooms vary widely, all of us must concern ourselves with our students' performance on standardized tests, which is why it becomes difficult for us to justify devoting classroom time to activities that do not directly serve that test preparation. But, as Kuyvenhoven (2009) says, "Books of standards, assessments, evaluations, and charts. These threaten the ordinary but vitally important learning relationships between people who share a room. Although I endorse accountable teaching and high standards

for success, I am worried about classrooms in which relationships, personal stories, and the sense of wonder and curiosity are considered tangential" (p. 191). Johnson & Freedman (2001) would agree: "Life in a classroom community needs to be about meaning-making between and among students as well as learning about each other and the topics under study" (p. 36). Jackson (1968) reminds us of the "hidden curriculum," or the unintended consequences of instruction. One such consequence is that if students see teachers as promoting test performance goals over interaction and mutual respect, their motivation and engagement decline, negatively affecting instruction and learning (Ryan & Patrick, 2001). After all, if there is no personal connection to school or—worse—no motivation to even attend, what good will dozens of literary analysis essays do?

Why Me?

Developing meaningful relationships with my students has always been an important part of my teaching philosophy. Part of that work was incorporating my students' stories into classroom discussion and journal do-nows whenever possible. But in these high-stakes testing, Race to the Top, No Child Left Behind times, English teachers are often pressured to cut things like personal narrative units, particularly if they're teaching in urban areas, where many students perform below grade level and schools are harshly punished for not meeting state standards (Darling-Hammond, 2012). Anyon (2009) has strong words for such systems: "Schools and districts in urban communities typically do not function to the benefit of the majority of low-income students. In print, and in public conversations, officials agree that these students deserve a better chance—yet policies and practices continually deprive them of opportunities students in affluent districts routinely enjoy" (p. 21). What steps can individual urban educators take toward providing their students with such opportunities?

I worked at a public high school in inner-city Boston that required me to teach ten books a year and assign twelve literary analysis essays a year. Setting aside the time required to guide students through the process of crafting stories from their lives was simply not an option. So it was not until I was able to teach a creative writing class that I got to witness the power of that process. With very few exceptions, I saw students working harder than I'd ever seen them work before and producing better-written products than anything they'd ever given me before; the richness and diversity of their experiences leapt off the page. Best of all, my relationships with them deepened in ways I'd never experienced before. The road had its bumps, but I can say without hyperbole that that semester changed the trajectory of my life. I now work for two non-profits dedicated to providing the stages—both written and oral—upon which underserved students can 'go public' with true stories from their lives, and all of my research is devoted to the further exploration of both the advantages and the potential pitfalls of that process, so that I can eventually implement it in both my classroom and others' in the safest and most productive way possible.

Also informing this work is the exploration of the power of 'going public' with my own stories, both orally and in writing. Through the performance and publication of stories from my life over the past few years, I have found that my connection with others and my understanding of myself has deepened. It has not been an easy journey, but it has been an *important* one. Knowing what I know now, I cannot imagine reentering the high school classroom without making personal storytelling an integral part of my curriculum. Part of my motivation to conduct this research comes from my desire to have more stable support for that pedagogical decision.

Why Storytelling?

Humans have such a long history of using storytelling as a way to connect to one another that it seems like an instinctual motivation and desire. “Insofar as we account for our own actions and for the human events that occur around us principally in terms of narrative, story, drama, it is conceivable that our sensitivity to narrative provides the major link between our own sense of self and our sense of others in the social world around us” (Bruner, 1986, p. 69). Storytelling is observable in every culture (Flukernik, 1996, p. 44), reproducing and changing the societies of individuals who use it to interact with each other (Tonkin, 1992, p. 1). “Cultures rely upon narrative conventions to maintain their coherence and to shape their members to their requirements. Indeed, commonplace stories and narrative genres even provide a powerful means whereby cultures pass on their norms to successive generations” (Bruner, 2010, p. 45). Storytelling is part and parcel of human socialization—a tool for making us known, both to ourselves and to others: “The very shape of our lives—the rough and perpetually changing draft of our autobiography that we carry in our mind—is understandable to ourselves and to others only by virtue of cultural systems of interpretation” (Bruner, 1990, p. 33). Gans (2000) argues that our ability to use language to understand and narrate story-events as separate from telling-events is one of the major differences between us and other, non-human animals. In fact, anything that we experience that does *not* get structured narratively does not get remembered (Kahneman, 2010), because “framing pursues experience into memory” (Bruner, 1990, p. 56) and, “literate or illiterate, we are our memories” (Tonkin, 1992, p. 1). Our brains seem wired for narrative, making us naturally receptive to it: “Just as the brain detects patterns in the visual forms of nature—a face, a figure, a flower—and in sound, so too it detects patterns in information. Stories are recognizable patterns, and in those patterns we find meaning. We use

stories to make sense of our world and to share that understanding with others. They are the signal within the noise" (Rose, 2011). So telling personal stories becomes a way for us to define and project ourselves.

Stories don't just convey information; they "demonstrate relationships between tellers, hearers, characters, and others" (Shuman, 1986, p. 21). Storytelling is a social action; "it anticipates and therefore adjusts to particular social responses" (Tonkin, 1992, p. 56). The audience members are active witnesses, participating in constructing the narrative and playing in its gaps (Richter, 1996). One perquisite of this gap-playing in listening to an oral story (as opposed to reading a written memoir, for example) is that the interaction takes place *live*, before the teller's very eyes. Storytellers "tell their listeners how they can or should be heard, thus shaping others' narrative identities in the process" (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, p. 113). So this becomes an important reason to give class time to storytelling—its potential power to connect our students to each other and therefore positively affect our classroom relationships. Oral storytelling units bank on many students' natural desire to share stories from their lives. Educational research has shown that oral storytelling offers important language experience and literacy preparation for ELLs (Rymes, 2003); allows students to exercise their imagination, communicate effectively, and think critically (Berkowitz, 2011); leads to deeper respect for other cultures and themselves; and often results in written essays that are more organized and engaging (Bailey, 2006). Johnson & Freedman (2001) believe, as I do, that "all elements that are vital to creating a strong community of learners can be found within the people who share classroom space each day. By sharing stories—and allowing students to share theirs—teachers create a community of learners that might just overcome some of the boundaries that keep people apart or alone in the world of school" (p. 43).

Why Investigate?

So how can teachers tap into the natural resource of their students' stories? One strategy is to formally introduce oral storytelling into the classroom—to explicitly teach students how to choose and craft stories from their lives and then allow them to publicly perform those stories. The Story Shop Community Education Program[1] in New York City is a non-profit devoted to bringing the art and craft of oral storytelling to populations that might not otherwise have access to it, including Title I urban public schools, drug rehabilitation centers, halfway houses, prisons, and more. I work as a lead instructor for this non-profit, and one my workshops housed this research. Story Shop instructors are not the only people who can do this kind of work; in fact, one of our major objectives is for the teachers in whose classrooms we work to eventually undertake similar storytelling workshops by themselves. Though implementing a formal oral storytelling unit is not easy (and comes with no small amount of risk), it offers the possibility of granting our students the right to tell their own stories and to tell them their way (Shuman, 1986; Bell, 2010). "Is it too much to envision today a school that provides the community, the attention to values, and the care of relationship that are associated with a living oral tradition? Such a school offers a legitimate means to express caring in addition to its cognitive agenda…it is a place where the English teacher can play a critically needed role" (McCaleb, 2003, p. 68).

Even so, we're left with a basic but nonetheless important question: do storytelling units like The Story Shop's really matter? What effects can they possibly have on our students' understandings of themselves and their relationships with each other? In short, are formal oral storytelling units worth the considerable time and effort required to successfully implement them in a classroom? This time and effort must be justified by more than just experience and assumptions. The literature on personal narrative processes suggests that the act of crafting

[1] a pseudonym

stories from their lives can be beneficial to students (Rosen & Rosen, 1988; Coles, 1989; Pennebaker, 1990; Kurtz & Ketcham, 1992; Wanner, 1994; Bailey, 2006; Eakin, 2008), and previous research has discussed the potentially positive effects of incorporating oral storytelling (with varying degrees of formality) into elementary school classrooms (McCabe, 1997; Munn, 1999), middle school classrooms (Diaw, 2009; Schwartz, 1989), and even teacher education programs (Coulter, Michael, & Poynor, 2007). But there is a dearth of studies on the effects of formal oral storytelling units in Title I urban public high schools. This inquiry aims to help fill that gap by addressing the following research question: How does an oral storytelling unit affect both individual students and their classroom relationships? More specifically, (1) How do individual students engage with an oral storytelling unit? (2) What is the perceived impact of an oral storytelling unit on classroom relationships? (3) How do students perceive the impact of an oral storytelling unit both on their understanding of themselves as individuals and on their relationships with each other? and (4) How does the teacher perceive the impact of an oral storytelling unit on her individual students and her classroom relationships?

It is useful to pause here to define some key terms in these research questions. First, I am defining 'Title I urban public high school' as a school located in a city, completely supported by public funds, with no exam- or performance-based admission requirements, that serves a 9^{th} to 12^{th} grade student population, 60% or more of whom qualify for free or reduced lunch (the same percentage New York City Department of Education uses in its definition). In questions 2-4, 'perceive' means 'to recognize or understand; to become aware of.' My goal was to capture my (questions 1-2), the teacher's (question 4), and the students' (question 3) own awareness, understanding, and recognition of how a storytelling unit affects them. The word 'impact' as it is used in research questions 2-4 means 'the difference' (if any) between perceptions before the

storytelling unit and perceptions afterward. Do the students, the teacher, and/or the researcher perceive individual students and/or the classroom relationships to be any different after the oral storytelling unit? If so, in what ways? The term 'classroom relationships' in this context means the emotional connection (or lack thereof) between the people who share a classroom (teacher(s) ←→ student(s) & student(s) ←→ student(s)). The word 'engage' as it is used in research question 1 means 'to become involved in.' This question was meant to guide my observation of individual students as they interacted with me and others throughout the oral storytelling unit. How do students become involved in the oral storytelling process? To what ends? Questions 1 and 2 were purposefully left open-ended in an effort to embrace the unknown. The immediate goal of this study was to investigate the effects that an oral storytelling unit might have had on students' understanding of themselves and to document and describe the types of interactions students had with each other when they were given the time and space to bear witness to each other's lives and 'go public' with stories that could otherwise have gone unheard. The long-term goal is for this research to help secure funding to get similar programs into more Title I urban public schools.

Within What Framework?

Through The Story Shop, I secured a position as a storytelling instructor in a class at a Title I public high school in New York City. The New York City Department of Education (NYC DOE) is the largest system of public schools in the United States, serving about 1.1 million students in over 1,700 schools. The average demographics of the NYC public schools are: 50% male and 50% female; 41% Hispanic, 35% Black, 11% Asian, and 12% White; 13% English language learners; 15% special education; and 74% on free or reduced lunch (http://schools.nyc.gov). This dissertation research was conducted at a high school in which I had

taught twice before and in which I had previously conducted a pilot study as a coursework assignment (The Story Shop has an ongoing relationship with the school and returns every year). This high school is in the borough of Brooklyn, and its demographics are slightly different from the average NYC school. Its roughly 300 students are 40% male and 60% female; 37% Hispanic, 53% Black, 10% Asian, and 0% White; 9% English language learners; and 16% special education students (NYC DOE 2011-2012 Quality Review Report). Up to 90% of the school's students receive public assistance (NYS 2010-2011 School Report Card). This school is open to all New York City residents, but the majority of its students live in the area immediately surrounding the school, which is called East New York (NYC High School Directory).

East New York is a mostly residential neighborhood in the eastern section of the borough of Brooklyn. 2010 census data shows just under 183,000 people living in East New York—52% Black, 37% Hispanic, 5% Asian, 3% White, and 3% 'Other,' with 51.2% receiving public assistance (http://www.nyc.gov). In an article that referred to East New York as an "economically depressed neighborhood" (Robbins, 2012), *The New York Times* reported that the 75th Precinct (located in East New York) had the most murders and the most robberies of any precinct in the city in 2011. It also had the highest number of stop and frisk incidents of any precinct in the city, 75% of which involved a Black person being searched (Robbins, 2012). In their 2014 Statement of District Needs, East New York's Community Board leaders described their neighborhood as home to "a variety of ethnic and income groups that reflect in a true sense the mosaic mirror of the City of Brooklyn." Their report also mentioned "overall district needs for affordable housing, economic development, health and social services, education, infrastructure, and public safety" (http://www.nyc.gov). It is impossible, of course, to separate the context of East New York from the public high school in which this research was housed; all

four of the students with whom I worked most closely lived within walking distance from the school.

I had no interest in conducting a research project about urban students and teachers that was purely exogenous, focusing on the external factors that affected them rather than focusing on how they themselves felt affected. Such a study would have lacked the perspectives I believe are crucial to understanding the effects of any pedagogical practice—that of the teachers and the students (Anyon, 2009). The goal of my inquiry was first to discover what a sample of urban students and their teacher actually did and the reasons they gave for doing it before trying to interpret their actions through filters derived from academic theory or my own personal experience (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010). It was important to me that I capture both the students' and their teacher's perspectives in addition to my own, as I viewed them as equal partners in the research process. Drawing on an interpretivist/social network approach, my research was shaped by my belief that "what people know and believe to be true about the world is *constructed or created and reinforced and supported* as people interact with one another over time in specific social settings" (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010, p. 67).

My research was grounded in the seven tenets of narrative qualitative research espoused by Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul (1997): "(1) There are many ways to come to know something and even then such knowing is partial; (2) There are numerous ways for us to report; (3) All of our messages have agendas; (4) Our language creates reality; (5) The researcher is deeply interrelated with what and who is being studied—research is context-culture bound; (6) Affect and cognition are inextricably united; and (7) What we understand as social reality is multifaceted, sometimes clashing, and often in flux" (p. 60). In my hunt for specific research tools that aligned with these tenets and my own personal experience, portraiture—as described

by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffmann Davis in their book *The Art and Science of Portraiture* (1997)—emerged as a useful backbone for a mixed-method exploration of the answers to my research questions. I believe, as Ely et al (1997) do, that "our qualitative works, as well as our lives, are products that we ourselves build from materials that we find most appropriate to what we believe" (p. 5). As such, my methodology (explained in more detail in Chapter 3) is a bricolage of sorts, marrying elements of quantitative methods with elements of narrative qualitative methods such as portraiture and ethnography. My focus was to record and interpret others' experiences and perspectives, deferring to "their authority, knowledge, and wisdom" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. xv). I wrote with my readers continually in mind, "seek[ing] to document and illuminate the complexity and detail of a unique experience or place, hoping that the audience will see themselves reflected in it, trusting that the readers will feel identified" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. 14). I focused on the strengths of the community I was studying while still keeping a critical eye, eventually creating this document of inquiry that will hopefully lead toward new understandings and insights as well as instigate change, both in this school and in others (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. 5). My job was *not* "to make a slick piece but to strive for writing a report that gets as close as possible to the essence—the whole business of what [I] studied, felt, and tentatively made sense about in the field" (Ely et al, 1997, p. 38). These principles, which underlie and gird my entire methodology, align with my beliefs about the world and a researcher's place in it and act as a framework for the main concepts that inform my research: oral storytelling, storytelling and identities, and storytelling and classroom relationships.

Chapter 2: What Do We Already Know?

About Oral Storytelling?

About Defining Oral Storytelling?

So what *is* oral storytelling, and how can it affect our individual students and their relationships with each other? First it is useful to define some key terms involved in oral storytelling. For 'narrative,' Schiff's (2007) definition fits this inquiry best: "The act of telling, narrating, or showing subjective experience…the act of expression in which persons make known the meaning of experiences and the significance of their actions" (p. 30). Though Schiff (2007) and Bal (2009) do not have the same stance when it comes to narrative, I feel that—for the purposes of this inquiry—their definitions work well together. Bal (2009) offers us the following: "A *narrative text* is a text in which an agent or subject conveys to an addressee ('tells' the reader) a story in a particular medium, such as language, imagery, sound, buildings, or a combination thereof. A *story* is the content of that text, and produces a particular manifestation, inflection, and 'colouring' of a fabula; the fabula is presented in a certain manner. *A fabula* is a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors" (p. 5). For the purposes of this research project, oral storytelling (defined in more detail later) lives under the umbrella of the personal narrative, or a story that one tells about oneself.

The study of narrative (narratology) has shifted over time. Though 'meta' language about narrative existed as early as Greek antiquity, narratology officially began in the mid-1960s (Meister, 2009). Its initial or 'classical' phase lasted until the early 1980s and focused particularly on identifying narrative universals, often confining the word 'narrative' to literature (Meister, 2009). Over the last forty years or so, narratologists have moved away from an assumption that narrative can be studied and analyzed objectively (a structuralist view) to a

recognition that narratives are everywhere and that readers/viewers/listeners actively construct narrative meaning (a poststructuralist view) (Currie, 1998). "Over the past twenty years, narratologists have paid increasing attention to the historicity and the contextuality of modes of narrative representation as well as to its pragmatic function across various media, while research into narrative universals has been extended to cover narrative's cognitive and epistemological functions" (Meister, 2009, p. 330). Narrative study from 1990 to the present is often referred to as 'new' narratologies, a heterogeneous group of theoretical focuses ranging from cultural and historical contexts, to human intellectual and emotional processing, to non-text-based genres and media, and more (Meister, 2009). It is now widely believed that "narrative is not only a chief means by which the individual self is defined, but it also exerts a formative influence on our understanding of the world about us" (Wortham, 2001, p. vii). Narrative can take many forms, "erupt[ing] at the intersection of experience, emotion, and language" (Wanner, 1994, p. 15). In addition to being our primary way of knowing the world (Romano, 1995), narrative saturates shapeless events with meaning (Rosen & Rosen, 1988) and is "constitutive of social life in the act of storytelling" (Bauman, 1986, p. 113).

Flukernik (1996) critiques traditional narratologists for being too dismissive of oral narratives, which she considers literature. In fact, she says, it was not until relatively recently historically that personal narratives of any kind were of interest to those in academic literature circles: "Except in the spiritual realm (following St. Augustine's *Confessions*) narratives of personal experience did not become 'productive' in literature until fairly late in literary history…This absence of first-personal narrative correlates with the putative pre-modern lack of interest in 'the individual'. According to the standard view of an 'invention' of the self in the Renaissance and the consequent 'birth' of the individual, personal self could not be seen except

in relation to God" (p. 77). Nowadays, many narratologists study written personal narratives, but oral storytelling is sometimes dismissed as 'irrelevant,' which she claims is a major failing of the field (p. 55), as oral storytelling does have an important place in the study of narrative.

About Storytelling as Compared to Personal Narrative Writing?

Oral storytelling is different from personal narrative writing such as memoir or autobiography in that it is told in front of a live audience (of one or more), it involves at least some improvisation, and it utilizes the extra dimensions of dialect, vocal shadings, audience response, and accompanying facial and body movements (Simons, 1990). "Telling and listening to a story is not the same thing as reading or writing it. Even if a storyteller uses the same words as are found on paper, the story is transformed when lifted into talk and experienced in each other's presence" (Kuyvenhoven, 2009, p. 4). Of course, oral stories vary greatly in length and style depending on context, audience, and the teller's purpose. The Story Shop Community Education program teaches a specific way to craft an oral story, including a purposeful and creative structure, a memorized first line, a memorized last line, and memorized bullet points in between, with the rest of the story being told more or less off-the-cuff; a Story Shop story is *not* a monologue, and therefore every telling is different. "The unexpected in oral narrative not only constitutes the life blood of narrative, its tellability; it is structurally central to the shape of experience" (Flukernik, 1996, p. 32). In a recent reflection on his own live storytelling performance, *New Yorker* writer Nathan Englander (2012) said, "There is something really compelling about telling a story live, something to being that free and that afraid, of knowing that, however long I practiced, the version of the story I was about to tell would be shared in just that way, only once."

Strong storytellers utilize dramatic and comedic timing, their audience's reactions, and vocal characterization to bolster their performance. The performance aspect of oral storytelling, or the immediate "relationship of the teller to the audience and to the told" (Flukernik, 1996, p. 44), adds an extra layer to the already complex act of self-narration found in genres more familiar to the classroom, such as memoir. "A spoken story needs an audience, not just to affirm its existence but to become what it is. Until the moment when the storyteller steps out on stage, the story is but an idea" (Thau, 2014). I list these differences simply to delineate the written and oral personal narrative genres—not to put one of the modes above the other; "the division between oral and written can imply a distinction between ordinary and artistic" (Shuman, 1986, p. 185). When done well, the craft of oral storytelling actually produces oral *literature*; good oral stories are verbal art, but deeply entrenched ethnocentric and elitist biases have established an image of them as formless, simple, and plebeian (Bauman, 1986, p. 7). "We've got four ways of communicating: reading, writing, speaking, listening. We spend all our time teaching reading and writing. We spend absolutely no time at all in most schools teaching either speaking or—more importantly still—listening" (Treasure, 2014). Oral storytelling skills, which involve speaking, listening, and interpersonal acumen, are just as important for students to learn as reading and writing skills are; "they are different ways of knowing" (Wanner, 1994, p. 42). Add to those skills the performance aspect—the "essence of spoken artistry" (Bauman, 1986, p. 3)—and students walk away from a good oral storytelling unit better prepared for a wide variety of real-world tasks. Last but not least, it is sometimes the students with the lowest writing skills who are the ones who grasp onto and excel during oral storytelling units. "Students, especially those with poor academic skills, otherwise rarely get to be acknowledged experts in anything. Being an expert is motivating; it builds self-confidence" (Simons, 1990, p. 2).

Sometimes, particularly in Title I urban public schools (which—due to the systemic, savage racial and economic inequalities still plaguing our country (Anyon, 2009; Kozol, 1991)—tend to be majority Black/Hispanic), students come from households and cultures with strong oral traditions (Gates & McKay, 1997; Lomelí, 1993), in which case storytelling units can become opportunities for them to showcase those skills in a space that might rarely (if ever) allow them to speak the way they do at home. Rickford and Rickford (2000) speak of "Black talk" (or "spoken soul") as something to be honored as an "expressive instrument" (p. 4), Gates (1988) points out how "richly textured and layered" the black vernacular tradition is (p. xx), and Willis (1995) calls on educators to reconceptualize literacy as something that builds on the cultural background and knowledge of students instead of something defined by one, dominant culture (p. 30). One of the potentially positive effects of an oral storytelling unit is its ability to affirm "students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style" (Smitherman, 1999, p. 376). Although Rickford and Rickford (2000) are careful to point out the importance of students' learning "the variety of English needed for school, formal occasions, and success in the business world," they also believe that our students' diversity of language "plays an essential, valuable role in our lives and in the life of the larger society to which we all belong" (p. 9). Allowing students to perform stories in their own, personal language can legitimize and honor their individual ways of speaking in a way school spaces usually don't.

<u>About Whether We Need Storytelling?</u>

In our increasingly fast-paced lives, we have lost patience for the time it takes to capture, craft, and 'go public' with our personal stories (Kurtz & Ketcham, 1992). We 'go public' with plenty of *information* about our lives (e.g., on Twitter or Facebook), and we tell plenty of stories

at the dinner table, but we rarely take the time to truly *craft* personal narratives. Turkle (2012) goes so far as to say that few Americans have real *conversations* anymore. "Human relationships are rich; they're messy and demanding. We have learned the habit of cleaning them up with technology. And the move from conversation to connection is part of this. But it's a process in which we shortchange ourselves. Worse, it seems that over time we stop caring, we forget that there is a difference" (p. SR1). McCaleb (2003) agrees that the conversational movement from the face to the screen has negatively affected relationships: "Print literacy has come to dominate orality to the point that the ability to build and sustain relationships is imperiled. Narrative—live, face-to-face, heart-to-heart story-making—is the language of relationship" (p. 67). This face-to-face interaction deficit is, sadly, particularly true of classrooms—perhaps even more so for urban classrooms, where teachers often turn to strict, teacher-centered methods of instruction in order to avoid discipline problems, and students' peers often discourage them from talking through painful memories, instead encouraging them to "suck it up" or "act tough" (Olson, 2009). Hawkes (2010) argues that "our work in schools should embody aspects of the life that our species has so long known: the small group, the primacy of the past and inherited experience, the place of the elder, the continuity and common values of a community…as in so many aspects of our lives, progress is most likely found by returning to what we knew before" (p. 184). Perhaps it is because of humanity's past—its long history of fire-lit tales—that the storytelling impulse remains strong for so many of our students. After all, swapping personal stories is still the stuff of first dates, interviews, and introductions; it is what we all turn to as a tool to get to know one another. And with time and nurturing, any student can uncover his/her inner raconteur (Rosen & Rosen, 1988).

About Storytelling and Identities?

Integrating storytelling into our curriculum is important because our students' stories are not merely *about* them, but in truly profound ways, our students' stories *are* them (Eakin, 2008), as "selves are constructed through storytelling" (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, p. 103). As our students compose their stories, their stories are composing them (Tonkin, 1992). "Stories tell us: We become the stories we tell and are told. In understanding narrative we can come to understand who we are and how we were made that way" (Richter, 1996, p. 8), a process that is in perpetual motion. While crafting and telling a personal story, we actively navigate an infinite combination of identities, borrowing structures from the traditional narratives of our culture but also playing in the margins of and the spaces between those narratives, creating new identities with every telling (Maan, 2010). "We could have as many selves as there are social relationships" (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, p. 124). Our identities and our stories co-construct each other, and each telling projects a different self: "Far from being a grand narrative settled at or near the center of personal experience, the self now materializes in myriad nooks and crannies of everyday life, reflecting one sense of who we are in one site, turning a second option for personal definition in another one" (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, p. 215). In storytelling, "the present gives rise to the past" (Freeman, 2001, p. 289), meaning "the present self both reports and creates an experience in which the past self participated" (Wanner, 1994, p. 103). Kahneman (2010) describes this as a transaction between the 'experiencing self' and the 'remembering self': "The remembering self does more than remember and tell stories. It is actually the one that makes decisions…We don't actually choose between experiences; we choose between memories of experiences. And even when we think about our future, we don't think of our future normally as experiences. We think of our future as anticipated memories." It is in this way that storytelling

becomes so closely related to identity formation that the teller's 'I' is not only slightly different from the 'I' in his/her story but slightly different from the 'I' that told his/her *last* story (Butler, 2005). For we are all "in an endless process of working through personae" (Gilmore, 2001, p. 104), and the more conscious we are of that process—the more 'meta' we have time to be—the more thorough and fulfilling that process can become: "Sustained attention to inner speech reveals ideas one did not know one thought, unsuspected connections that illuminate both oneself and the outside objects of one's thought" (Moffett, 1981, p. 148).

McAdams (2007) emphasizes "the *integrative* power of personal narrative—how it is that stories put things together for the person, how they lend coherence to a life by organizing its many discordant features into the synchronic and diachronic structures of character and plot" (p. 20). Eakin (2008) agrees, saying that our autobiographical stories "give a degree of permanence and narrative solidity—or 'body,' we might say—to otherwise evanescent states of identity feeling" (p. 77). Roemer (1995) adds, "If the self had not always been in doubt, there would be no stories. Just as historical accounts confirm the identity of a group or nation, so story clearly serves the continuity of the individual" (p. 134). Previous research has explored how memoir and other personal narrative writing can be used as tools for the construction of both personal (Van Sluys, 2003; Lowry, 2010) and professional (Conle, 1999) identities. But the interplay between identities- and story-construction is messy, and integration, solidity, and continuity are more elusive than guaranteed in the storytelling process. Even when we do manage to find some coherence in the process of telling a story, Maan (2010) argues that narrative is only "holding the fragments of life together and assigning them temporary and provisional meaning in relation to one another" (p. xix). Percy (2014) agrees: "You're not ever going to comprehend a life fully on the page, because life keeps changing." That does not mean, however, that the process is not

worthwhile. “We as narrators can view our lives retrospectively and narrate in a way that takes all or most of our experiences into account in any particular telling of any part of the story. We can consider the entire story in the telling or any particular part of the story. We can see connections between causes and effects, and repeating patterns, without narrating a story with formal unity…narrative unity and wholeness are not required in order to have a coherent personal identity” (Maan, 2010, p. xvi). As Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) puts it, “Keeping intact one’s shifting and multiple identity and integrity is like trying to swim in a new element, an ‘alien’ element. There is an exhilaration in being a participant in the further evolution of humankind, in being ‘worked’ on” (p. 17). The process of crafting stories from their lives, however messy, can still provide our students with meaning for their experiences. “Narration becomes a method of extending agency” (Maan, 2010, p. xviii).

In an oral storytelling workshop I once taught, I worked with a student who came to some profound realizations about herself and her relationship with her parents (who split when she was three) through the process of crafting a story about their break-up. On her fourth or fifth run of it, Dashiana[2] included a new epilogue about how she respected her mom more now than she did when she was younger. The epilogue felt ad-libbed, as if she was thinking out loud—realizing how she felt as she was describing it. Romano (1995) says, “How can I know *what I think about what I think* until I tell a story about it?” (p. 3). Her parents’ break-up was becoming more clear to her, as the story itself was constructing the memory of the event. “Events are the abstractions from narrative. It is the structures of signification in narrative that give coherence to events in our understanding, that enable us to construct in the interdependent process of narration and interpretation a coherent set of interrelationships that we call an ‘event’” (Bauman, 1986, p. 5). But her relationship with her parents was also becoming more clear to her. “As we story

[2] All names are pseudonyms.

ourselves, those stories provide the moral horizons for evaluating who and what we've become. There are plenty of options for self construction and self assessment" (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, p. 230). I saw Dashiana's perspective on each of her parents shift through the process of crafting her story. "To tell one's story is to assign meaning to events and experiences, and re-telling one's story is a way to creatively re-assign meaning to experience after critical reflection" (Maan, 2010, p. 13). Stories change and grow with every telling; some details are lost, some details are added, and some details are made up, but what begins to emerge is a tiny portrait—a slice of a life. "Through narrative, we construct, reconstruct, in some ways reinvent yesterday and tomorrow. Memory and imagination fuse in the process" (Bruner, 2002, p. 93).

A Story Shop crafted story fits Freeman's (2007) definition of a 'big story,' or one that involves an event or series of events that significantly shaped the teller's life (versus 'small stories,' which include the quotidian anecdotes we tell more often) (p. 155-56). Freeman is interested in "the *revelatory* power of big stories—that is, their capacity to yield insight and understanding of the sort that cannot occur in the immediacy of the present moment and the small stories that issue from it" (p. 158). He acknowledges that the distance between the story-event and the telling-event can be problematic for memory 'accuracy' (if such a thing exists) but insists that 'big stories' are "vitally important in narrative inquiry…they embody a mode of interpretive reflection that goes beyond the vicissitudes of the moment. This does not mean that they are any better, or 'truer,' than small stories. Neither small stories nor big ones have privileged access to 'the' truth. Rather, they tell about different regions of experience" (p. 162). Flukernik (1996) would agree, adding that the telling of these so-called 'big stories' keeps important past events from fading from memory and allows the teller to interpret them through the lens of present-day concerns (p. 25). Schank (1990) would go so far as to say that a person's

ability to explain important events through story is a critical aspect of his or her intelligence, which he says is "really about understanding what has happened well enough to be able to predict when it might happen again" (p. 1). He insists that "learning from one's own experiences depends upon being able to communicate our experiences as stories to others" (p. 12).

People often tell stories less to persuade others to agree with them than to figure out exactly what their opinions are (Polletta, 2012) and who they are in the social dynamic. "Telling a story about oneself can sometimes transform that self…narrators can change who they are, in part, by telling stories" (Wortham, 2001, p. xi). It may be argued that telling personal stories is the best way to explain who we are at any given moment—both to ourselves and to each other (Currie, 1998)—and that all one's identities are comprised of masterfully arranged collections of his/her stories: "A self is probably the most impressive work of art we ever produce, surely the most intricate" (Bruner, 2002, p. 14). Crafting stories about ourselves is powerful because it helps us "express and manage multiple, partly contradictory selves and experiences" (Wortham, 2001, p. 7). Making sense of who we once were and the forces that molded us into who we are now does not happen automatically; that kind of enlightenment is the result of a process that is most easily made possible by storytelling—in all its myriad modes (Zinsser, 1998).

Of course, making sense of ourselves is a never-ending process that can never be fully completed due to storytelling's structural conditions (Butler, 2005), for we inevitably alter an experience the moment we put it into words (Tonkin, 1992), and our stories—along with the words we use to tell them—change over time. "When identities depend on the narration of experience, both the identity and the experience exceed the boundaries of that narrative—we are more than our narratives, and our experiences are larger than we, belonging to others as well as ourselves" (Shuman, 2005, p. 161). Because we cannot separate our identities from our

surroundings, our stories are context-laden: "Nobody's ability to recall is independent of social milieu because it is through that milieu that the cognitive ability was forged. Equally, the social milieu is not independent of the cognitive operations of the persons in it. Insofar as the milieu exists as practices, these practices act dialectically, structuring the people who think and act them…they may thus be conducive both to stability and to change" (Tonkin, 1992, p. 105). Both our stories and the memories on which they're based change depending on who's listening (Lehrer, 2011).

Again, stories are both constructed and constructing—as we tell them, they shape our memories, and sometimes 'story-truth' ends up trumping the 'happening-truth' of reality (O'Brien, 1990). (If such a thing as 'reality' exists— Bal (2009) "cautions against the illusion of objectivity, both in storytelling as witnessing and in analysis as the scientific discovery of truth" (p. 227-28), and Bruner (2010) reminds us that "'realities' are *made*, not found" (p. 47) and that "even when we speak of 'true stories,' we know somewhere down inside that we are using 'true' in a metaphorical sense" (p. 45-46).) Though sometimes 'story-truth' does a better job of capturing the essence of a series of events and what it *felt* like to be a part of it, "conveying a true understanding of human experience" (Shuman, 2004, p. 4), it is important to recognize the power that the storytelling process has to warp memories. "Narrative, then, presents an ontological dilemma. Are stories real or imagined? How far have they leaped beyond our perception and memory of things in this world? And, indeed, are perception and memory yardsticks of the real or are they artificers in the employ of convention?" (Bruner, 2002, p. 22-23). The memory construction that occurs throughout the storytelling process is *not* the same as capturing an accurate, historical rendering of the past (again, if such a thing is possible): "Questions of nostalgia and sentimentality inevitably cast a shadow on the enterprise of recovering the past.

And the cautionary tales or therapeutic narratives designed to produce coherent, authentic selves out of the chaos of ordinary life are plagued by the ongoing challenges of counternarratives, the fragmentation of experience, and the blurring of personal and more than personal" (Shuman, 2005, p. 151). Research has shown that these challenges increase when the social component of live storytelling is added in (Edelson, Sharot, Dolan, & Dudai, 2011). The silver lining of these challenges is that through storytelling, we learn to explore, question, and grapple with the subjects and events in our stories (Bauman, 1986). This is such an important lesson for students—that there is no such thing as a story that totally captures the 'happening-truth' of an event, as all accounts are passed through imperfect beings, each with his/her own standpoint. To believe otherwise—that any one person has the 'real' story—is dangerous.

Though stories' representation of experience is never complete and can never fully capture 'happening-truth,' their potential to convey 'story-truth' makes telling them a worthwhile endeavor for us and our students. After all, 'story-truth' "has special significance in its own right…making contact with the actual past may be of far less significance than creating a coherent and consistent account of a particular set of events" (Spence, 1982, p. 28). Personal storytelling's allegiance is not so much to factual record as it is to the history of a self (Eakin, 2008). All storytellers "must manufacture a text, imposing narrative order on a jumble of half-remembered events. With that feat of manipulation they arrive at a truth that is theirs alone, not quite like that of anybody else who was present at the same events" (Zinsser, 1998, p. 6). When we allow our students to craft and present their 'story-truths,' the accuracy of the stories they tell seems less important than what can be socially accomplished in our classrooms (Holstein & Gubrium, 2012).

Another way that storytelling can shape a sense of self is its ability to integrate a traumatic event into one's identities. This is a tricky and complicated process, but studies have shown that stories do have the capacity to heal (McCaleb, 2003; Charon, 2007; Ramírez-Esparza & Pennebaker, 2007). While trauma is something we normally associate with large-scale disasters, "trauma also lurks in the everyday lives of children and youth who suffer from private, personal difficulties" (Dutro, 2008, p. 424). Contrary to popular opinion, the impact of a great loss does not automatically lessen with time. "To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (Caruth, 1995, p. 4-5). But "attempts to inhibit thoughts actually exacerbate them" (Pennebaker, 1990, p. 59), and the best way to heal and move on from trauma is to confront it and capture it within the confines of language: "Traumatic memories are the unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experiences, which need to be integrated with existing mental schemes, and be transformed into narrative language" (van der Kolk & van der Hart, 1995, p. 176).

Once trauma is captured in narrative form, it becomes possible (though certainly not assured) to integrate it into one's identities, potentially causing positive change, growth, and maturity. This can be done in a classroom oral storytelling workshop, but it is not easy and by no means guaranteed. "For the testimonial process to take place, there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an *other*—in the position of one who hears. Testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude. The witnesses are talking to *somebody*: to somebody they have been waiting for for a long time" (Laub, 1992, p. 70-71). An enormous amount of trust and a significant amount of time is required for this testimonial process; it often involves digging through years and layers of pain. Val Plumwood's (2000) personal history article tells the story of her surviving a vicious crocodile attack. Her account of that horrible day

is followed by a reflection on the nearly decade-long internal journey she had to make before being able to talk about it. Once she was able to, however, she found that retelling the story had tremendous healing power: "It seemed as if each telling took part of the pain and distress of the memory away" (p. 6). Despite her positive experience, however, it is important to remember that even if our students are able to make the same journey, not all of them will benefit from its completion (Ramírez-Esparza & Pennebaker, 2007).

The stakes in the testimonial process are high; there are very real consequences if a student tells his/her story before (s)he feels truly heard: "When there is no empathy, when telling one's story…does not include another person who is actively listening and asking, the act of telling may turn into a reactualization or repetition of the event narrated. The telling does not necessarily provide any relief but rather entails a reactualization of the trauma" (Jelin, 2002, p. 65). It is our responsibility as teachers to build a community in which our students feel that they can safely tell their stories, for "the presence of students' hard stories…require re-visioning the classroom as a space of testimony and witness" (Dutro, 2008, p. 424). It is also our responsibility to actively participate in what could be a profound and healing process for them, for "the role of witness is integral to the act or art of teaching" (Dutro, 2008, p. 428). But stories are not magical. They do not have the power to enter into painful, complicated situations and package them in ribbon-wrapped closure overnight. "The juxtaposition between the intersections and the absences, among history, memory, and trauma, pushes the limits of storytelling" (Shuman, 2005, p. 3). Publicly sharing stories—particularly ones that are difficult to tell—is a powerful process and not one to be taken lightly. "When students speak, they speak in a critical public context: as such, testimony is a public and political—not a private, individual—act" (Amy, 2006, p. 58). Too often, those of us excited about bringing the storytelling process to students rush into the

experience without giving proper pause to the potentially negative consequences of students sharing more than they want to or are ready to share. A lot of work must go into creating and maintaining relationships before the true power of stories can be released.

Still, it remains important for us as teachers to set aside the time required for our students to capture and 'go public' with their stories, partly because of the dangers inherent in someone else telling their stories *for* them if they do not have the chance to tell them themselves. Our society seems to be simultaneously and paradoxically fascinated by and terrified of urban teenagers. There is no shortage of books, op-eds, and movies about them, but so few of those are actually written, created, or directed by the teenagers themselves. Even when an 'urban story' is told with the best of intentions (as a call to action to ameliorate a largely broken inner-city public school system, for example), the story is still not the students' own and therefore—on some level—dangerous: "When does storytelling as making meaning become storytelling as misrepresentation and misappropriation?" (Shuman, 2005, p. 1). Adichie (2009) speaks of the danger of 'the single story' often applied to others by those in power. She points out the media and western literature's responsibility for shaping a popular and ignorant American assumption that all Africans are "unable to speak for themselves and waiting to be saved by a kind, white foreigner." There are equally popular and equally ignorant American assumptions that urban high school students are abject and in need of rescue, which makes it all the more urgent for us to allow our students to publicly tell their own stories. "How they are told, who tells them, when they are told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power" (Adichie, 2008). There is power—both the good and the dangerous kind—in being given the skills and the platform on which to tell your own story. We can offer this to our students, inside of whom are "numerous unheard counter-stories" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32) that might not otherwise get shared.

Though this potential force can be a good or a bad thing (or a mixture of both), it is always safer when stories stay with their original owners.

Of course, once someone 'goes public' with a story, it is no longer solely his/her own, a concept that complicates everything and is one of the risks involved in the use of any medium as powerful as public storytelling. To return to Bal's (2009) definitions, the listener first hears the text being spoken, not the fabula. The fabula is the result of the mental activity of *listening* and the interpretation by the listener, "an interpretation influenced both by the initial encounter with the text and by the manipulations of the story. The fabula is a memory trace that remains after the [listening] is completed" (p. 10), meaning our stories take on new lives in the minds of our listeners. "We are incorrigible reworkers of our own and other people's stories" (Rosen & Rosen, 1988, p. 170). Stories and humans have a kind of symbiotic relationship, "thus stories are both subjective—as I tell the story, it becomes radically mine—as well as external: When given close consideration, no story is ever anyone's own, but is always borrowed in its parts" (Frank, 2012, p. 36).

Another risk in this process is that sometimes the identities expressed in our students' stories are not the ones we were hoping to see (Lensmire, 1994). And sometimes a student's public story can be skewed and reused by someone else for his/her own purposes. "The narrative self is threatened when its story is taken over by others and given an alien meaning" (Plumwood, 2000, p. 6). But "adolescents [have] custody over very little except their bodies and their words" (Shuman, 1986, p. 53), and too often their words are silenced or ignored. (Sadly, they don't even have custody over their bodies sometimes.) So despite the risks involved, formal oral storytelling units are worthwhile investments of teachers' time and effort because of the positive effects they can have on students' sense of self. "The opportunity to tell stories about

their lives can help autobiographical narrators establish a coherent sense of who they are…autobiographical narrators do more than understand themselves differently by representing their lives; they also learn how to act in characteristic ways with respect to others by enacting characteristic positions as they narrate their lives" (Wortham, 2001, p. 157).

About Storytelling and Classroom Relationships?

One of the most exciting things about oral storytelling is its involvement of a live audience. "Whereas with written genres the setting in which one reads a text is often irrelevant to its interpretation, in oral genres the occasion of performance is clearly important and may be definitive of the audience's expectation" (Tonkin, 1992, p. 51). In the case of an oral storytelling unit done in an English classroom, this audience consists of a student's peers, who become an invaluable part of both the crafting and the performance process and can be either/both a positive and/or a negative force throughout. While Roemer (1995) would say that "we come to story in large part to be placed, for just as it reintegrates the central figure into the whole, so it joins us who are watching or listening into a community" (p. 144), Tonkin (1992) would remind us that the social contexts of oral storytelling are not always unifying, as they "include the additional condition that their tellers must intersect with a palpable audience at a particular moment in time and space…Just as narrators may monitor the audience's reactions, and take account of them to adjust their tone and presentation, so the audience may play an energetic part in the proceedings, ask questions, answer back, or perhaps just walk away" (p. 38). It is through this exchange between and among individuals that classroom relationships can be both built and eroded. The literature explored below has shown that personal storytelling in the classroom can influence relationships in a number of ways.

I will first focus on the perspectives and research studies that discuss the potentially positive effects that storytelling can have on classroom relationships. Paul John Eakin (2008) speaks of the "psychological gratification" of autobiography's "teller-effect" (p. 77). Indeed, while capturing a story privately has been proven to be worthwhile (Pennebaker, 1990), storytelling might reach its greatest potential when done publicly. "The more you self-disclose to someone, the more you like them, the more they like you. It may have something to do with forming social bonds" (Dotinga, 2012). Gergen & Gergen (2007) propose five reasons swapping personal stories might bring people closer together: (1) Receptivity (stories are commonly associated with pleasure), (2) Familiarity (stories are a major vehicle of communication), (3) Witness Trust (firsthand accounts are generally trusted sources of evidence), (4) Empathic Witnessing (a story may cause visceral responses in the audience, possibly creating intimacy), and (5) Recreating the Self (in listening to a story, imagination can allow one to play out many different roles) (p. 139-40). They claim, "There is something particularly effective about listening to others' narratives that crosses boundaries of meaning and brings people into a state of mutuality" (p. 139). This is not an easy process, of course; in fact, it is a risky one, as it involves no small amount of vulnerability. But Brown (2010) would say that "in order for connection to happen, we have to allow ourselves to be seen—really seen," and Shuman (2005) would agree that there is a potential payoff to all the hard work that goes into sharing one's story: "Discovering that one's own story is not singular and idiosyncratic can help to provide a way to speak about what might have felt unspeakable" (p. 54).

An audience—whether real or imagined—is a required part of storytelling (Moffett, 1981). But when that audience is a collection of *real people* you see and interact with every day, the storytelling process can become even more powerful (Berkowitz, 2011). "People remember

experiences they have been a part of. And a good storyteller makes listeners become part of an experience. They make you feel that you are there. Schools, for the most part, do nothing of the sort" (Schank & Berman, 2007, p. 263). Grace (2004) found that bringing the oral tradition into his classroom made learning seem more relevant and literacy skills more attainable, particularly for the students who were struggling with more traditional school-based literacy activities. Johnson & Freedman (2001) found that their students' stories simultaneously rose out of and created the relationships between and among their students and themselves. "To really educate students we realize that we need to know about their adolescent world, which concerns the nesting of storying within classroom discussions, which in turn creates powerful and tolerant classroom communities" (p. 44). Phelan (1991) and Read & Read (1998) join Johnson & Freedman (2001) in touting the academic benefits of allowing storytelling to become a meaningful part of the curriculum, including sharpened listening and critical evaluation skills and increased general participation. "Teachers who use stories and narratives in their teaching can bridge the gap between control and content" (Zander, 2007, p. 201).

Johnson & Freedman (2001) end their article by saying, "In a classroom that allows freedom of expression within the boundaries of a caring democratic community, students learn to care for themselves and one another" (p. 44). They claim that adolescents, social by nature, can learn how to better connect with others by sharing and listening to each other's stories in class: "Through their interaction, students come to realize how their similarities and differences create a rich diversity in their lives and classrooms" (p. 36). Storytelling audiences use 'mental time travel' to insert a storyteller's past experiences into their own present consciousnesses (King, 2011), which can help build empathy and allow students to better navigate future interactions with each other (Paul, 2012). "We must recognize that students' testimonials emotionally impact

each member of the class and affect both the dynamic and the method of our interaction. A consideration of the sociopolitical effects of bearing witness on students moves us beyond the critique frequently lodged against personal disclosure in the classroom as pseudo-therapy, and towards an analysis of politically transformative social relations" (Amy, 2006, p. 57-58).

Dr. Paul Zak (2013) conducted an experiment in which he took blood from participants both before and after they heard a father tell a story about his two-year-old son having brain cancer. In the second blood draw, he found more cortisol (which focuses our attention on something important) and oxytocin (which is associated with feelings of connection and empathy). He also used functional brain imaging to see inside participants' brains as they were listening to the story. He found that the areas of the brain that were most active were those associated with "theory of mind" (understanding what others are doing) and those that were "rich in oxytocin receptors" (which, again, are associated with feelings of empathy). "Stories are powerful," he says, "because they transport us into other people's worlds, but in doing that, they change the way our brains work and potentially change our brain chemistry. And that's what it means to be a social creature—to connect to others, to care about others, even complete strangers."

Read & Read (1998) would agree: "In collective storytelling in the class(room), the borderlands move from the 'outside'—the fictional, the textual, the abstract 'out there'—to the 'inside'—the local and particular. If the process works, if a secular interpretive community develops in the class(room), then a kind of communal magic can spark extraordinary intellectual activity, as when students begin to build on and respond to each other's work" (p. 114). Johnson & Freedman (2001) call for us to change our attitudes about what makes for productive class time: "Students want to know more about each other's lives and the lives of those not like them

but who are still in their world. They also want to feel a part of something bigger than they are, and communities accomplish that. When teachers become willing to risk community building with all its messiness, then students are better able to support one another in their learning process. Teachers, however, must trust their students and trust the process" (p. 42).

Of course, storytelling can also have potentially negative effects on classroom relationships. "Stories are rarely 'just neutral.' In their very nature, they inevitably throw their weight in support of or against what is culturally taken for granted, however subtly" (Bruner, 2010, p. 46). It is important to remember, yet again, that the stories we tell are both constructed and constructing, for both the teller and the listener (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The audience spurs our story and receives our story, but it also integrates our story into existing schemas, muddying the waters and opening the door for possible misunderstanding or misinterpretation. "It is the very ephemerality of the storytelling experience that makes it the personal property of the listeners, a special gift, delivered once and left for possessive metamorphosis only within the consciousness of each individual receiver" (Rosen & Rosen, 1988, p. 71). But this 'gift exchange' does not always go smoothly. "Not all possibilities for participation are realized in any narrative performance…not all stories are developed, circulated, or heard; not everyone is a voluntary audience; not all experiences or perspectives are materialized and valued" (Peterson & Langellier, 2007, p. 208). Not all public storytelling experiences end happily. Sometimes the openness and vulnerability inherent in our students' sharing personal stories with each other only serves to stabilize any divisions already present between them (Lensmire, 1994). A public storytelling unit is neither the time nor the place for levity. A safe and supportive classroom community must be established before the process begins.

It is also important to recognize that identifying with someone else's story is not always a straightforwardly positive thing. "Empathy is one kind of obligation, sometimes creating a possibility for understanding across differences, sometimes involving sentimentality, sometimes romanticizing tragedy as inspiration, but in any case deeply compromising the relationship between tellers and listeners" (Shuman, 2005, p. 20). Every English teacher knows Atticus Finch's famous line from Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird* (1960). "However, the metaphor of wearing another's shoes not only makes it seem easier than it is but also obscures the complex ethical issues involved" (Shuman, 2005, p. 150). Empathy "rarely changes the circumstances of those who suffer. If it provides inspiration, it is more often for those in a privileged position of empathizer rather than empathized" (Shuman, 2007, p. 180). A common assumption is that empathy can only further a listener's understanding of a storyteller, but sometimes what someone thinks is 'understanding' is really just an emotional response (Shuman, 2007, p. 179). Brooks (2011) goes so far as to say, "These days empathy has become a shortcut. It has become a way to experience delicious moral emotions without confronting the weaknesses in our nature that prevent us from actually acting upon them" (p. A25). But even when tempered by these sobering reminders, empathy and "the goal of mutual understanding is [still] narrative's greatest promise" (Shuman, 2005, p. 150) and therefore a worthy goal.

An oral storytelling unit cannot magically create healthy classroom relationships out of ugliness and chaos. What it can do, however, is strengthen one that already exists. In her book *And None of It Was Nonsense: The Power of Storytelling in School* (1988), Betty Rosen describes her experience incorporating oral storytelling into her English classroom at a comprehensive school for boys in north London. She found that her students' stories "were as valuable as any literature [she] might bring to the classroom. More, these stories themselves

often became literature" (p. 10). Her students absorbed and analyzed each other's stories with more dedication and fervor than she had ever seen them devote to a poem or novel. Rosen argues that the first resource any teacher has is the children in his/her classroom, and having students share oral stories from their lives is the best way to "plunder" that resource (p. 12). She also reminds us that the teacher is not the be-all and end-all of this process; the students can and should take over the leadership role at times. "Every [student] has something to say: the door must be open for each different voice so that all can benefit from the proceeds. We are all storytellers" (p. 16). She vulnerably admits that because of their low skills and poor sense of classroom community, she had assumed that a storytelling unit would not work for one of her classes. She tried it anyway, and it turned out that the "experience was enough to sink all antagonisms and create an essential—albeit short-lived—harmony" (p. 43). She wonders if making storytelling a *habit* in her classroom (rather than just an ephemeral part of one unit) "would have made permanent and real that temporary unity" (p. 43). Another delightful yet unexpected effect of her storytelling unit was "that the ensuing individual work by the pupils was of a much higher standard than they generally achieved" (p. 43), suggesting that storytelling units increase student motivation and buy-in to school. The greatest benefit Rosen found, however, was that incorporating oral storytelling into her classroom brought her and her students closer to each other, for "story-hearing cannot be a solitary matter…it is essentially and literally communal. There is constant interactive human awareness" (p. 723). Humphreys (2000) argues that "community narratives and personal stories interact" (p. 504); any given classroom's story both constructs and is constructed by its members' stories. This mutual construction, this 'constant interactive human awareness,' can produce both harmony and dissonance, but it seems to have produced more of the former for Rosen's students in the United Kingdom.

In her book *In the Presence of Each Other: A Pedagogy of Storytelling* (2009), Johanna Kuyvenhoven describes her ethnographic study of the uses and effects of storytelling in a Grade 4/5 public school class in a large Canadian city. She found that storytelling was used in the classroom in three main ways: (1) *talking* with stories, (2) *thinking* with stories, and (3) *imagining* with stories. *Talking* with stories was the most common mode she observed, in which students and teacher swapped stories and "were in social awareness of one another" (p. 52). She argues that this mode "helped students develop vocabulary and language abilities…[and] also developed social awareness and facility" (p. 5). She defined *thinking* with stories as when students and teacher made connections and/or drew conclusions from stories, "in mindful interaction with the storytelling" (p. 52). In this mode, the teacher "used storytelling to contextualize information, give relevance to historical events, make social issues pertinent, or create sturdy frames for abstract knowledge" (p. 5). Lastly, she defined *imagining* with stories as happening during longer, more artfully constructed stories, wherein listeners "gave themselves up wholly to the experience…[and] children slid into a storyworld" (p. 53). In this mode, she argues, students "learned about being human in its states of triumph, despair, hilarity, and horror. Such storytelling events offered critical means to explore complex questions" (p. 5). She does not put any one of these modes above any other but rather insists that the three are interdependent, complementary parts of one pedagogy: "Whether the storytelling happens within a stream of talk, during a thinking interaction with the story, or from the vivid place of deep imagination, each is an experience of integrity. Learning is happening; social, linguistic, and cognitive abilities are developing; and a body of knowledge nurtured" (p. 59). She urges teachers to set aside the time and devote the energy needed to incorporate storytelling into their classrooms in meaningful ways, for "school is a place where still-new persons gather together to

learn about where they are, what to do, and how to do it. Importantly, they are learning *why* they should do anything at all…with every new story, answers grow, change, or crumple" (p. 7).

A vital part of classroom relationship building during oral storytelling units occurs when teachers are vulnerable and share their own stories with students. "To be effective witnesses for the testimonies of our students, we need, in turn, to allow them to be our witnesses—even when it is hard, even when it feels too risky" (Dutro, 2008, p. 424). After all, how can we ask our students to do something we are unwilling to do ourselves? (Rosen & Rosen, 1988). "A circular notion of testimony and witness in classrooms requires teachers to participate as both witnesses to student experiences and testifiers to their own" (Dutro, 2011, p. 197-98). One of Robert Coles's (1989) mentors once told him, "Their story, yours, mine—it's what we all carry with us on this trip we take, and we owe it to each other to respect our stories and learn from them" (p. 30). Kazemek (1985) argues that by sharing their own stories, teachers can instill more interest in the rest of their curriculum, through "demonstrating that the lives of real people—people the students know, respect, and love—are at least as important as the things they read about in their textbooks" (p. 217-18). Even President Barack Obama has spoken of the potential benefits of sharing personal stories with students:

> [Obama] talked about a visit that he made last year to Hyde Park Academy, a public high school on Chicago's South Side, where he met with a group of about twenty boys in a program called Becoming a Man. "They're in this program because they're fundamentally good kids who could tip in the wrong direction if they didn't get some guidance and some structure," Obama recalled. "We went around the room and started telling each other stories. And one of the young men asked me about me growing up, and I explained, You know what? I'm just like you guys. I didn't have a dad. There were times where I was angry and wasn't sure why I was angry. I engaged in a bunch of anti-social behavior. I did drugs. I got drunk. Didn't take school seriously. The only difference between me and you is that I was in a more forgiving environment, and if I made a mistake I wasn't going to get shot. And, even if I didn't apply myself in school, I was at a good enough school that just through osmosis I'd have the opportunity to go to college. And, as I'm speaking, the kid next to me looks over and he says, 'Are you talking about *you*?' And there was a benefit for them hearing that." (p. 53)

Though all of the aforementioned warnings about the potentially negative effects of sharing personal stories in the classroom (Peterson & Langellier, 2007; Lensmire, 1994; Shuman, 2005; Brooks, 2011) still stand in any discussion of teacher stories (teachers are by no means immune to being attacked and/or misunderstood), sharing our stories with our students may also strengthen our relationships with them: "The power of narrative and dialogue as contributors to reflective awareness in teacher and students is that they provide opportunities for deepened relations with others and serve as spring boards of ethical actions" (Greene, 1991, p. 8). Teacher storytelling may also help even out the power dynamics in the classroom (Rymes, 2003). "The encounter between and among teachers and students is an encounter among intellectuals who are differently constituted as subjects… [storytelling] shifts the focus from a dyadic, hierarchical teacher-student relationship to a collective relationship, where students become agents, subjects in the process of producing knowledge" (Read & Read, 1998, p. 114). Each story we share with our students adds a new layer to the participatory creation of our identity as their teacher: the story of 'I' in the context of 'us.' "Selves, whatever metaphysical stand one takes about the 'reality,' can only be revealed in a transaction between a teller and a told" (Bruner, 1990, p. 124-25). This teller-told transaction has been the source of some of my strongest bonds with students in my eight years of teaching, yet I still need to be reminded of how important it is to set aside the time necessary to have those transactions.

Chapter 3: How Can We Know More?

A challenge that all researchers face is how to design a methodology that not only aligns with their epistemological beliefs but also serves as the means by which they can answer their research questions. As Maxwell (2005) reminds us, "there is no 'cookbook' for doing qualitative research" (p. 79), so each researcher is left to make important decisions based on the specific context(s) in which she will be working, the issues that she will be studying, and the people with whom she will be working. As a qualitative researcher, I *was* the research instrument—a concept that was as terrifying as it was empowering. I was charged with making some very important decisions: how structured did I want my methods to be? On how many people would I focus? How would I choose who those people would be? What information would I gather? How would I make sense of it all once I had it? What were the potential pitfalls of all of these choices? Huge questions, all. And on top of them lied the obvious issue of how very *personal* my chosen topic of study was—both for me and for the teacher and students with whom I worked. It behooved me, therefore, to address these questions with maximum sensitivity and awareness. The following pages are my attempt to do so.

Why Portraiture?

Though this inquiry utilized mixed methods, the portraiture methods laid out by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (1997) form its backbone. Because portraiture has been the subject of no small amount of controversy since its debut, it becomes necessary both to address some of its common critiques and to lay out my defense for choosing it here. First, it is important to note that much of Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis's methodology has been used before, if under different names. "There are other good 'portraits' out there, spanning back

over decades of lucid qualitative research on schooling" (Vallance, 1998, p. 68). Many of the strategies mentioned in *The Art and Science of Portraiture* (1997) are those utilized in most good qualitative research, including an "explicit effort to combine empirical and aesthetic description, [a] focus on the convergence of narrative and analysis, [a] goal of speaking to broader audiences beyond the academy…and [an] explicit recognition of the use of the self as the primary research instrument for documenting and interpreting the perspectives and experiences of the people and the cultures being studied" (p. 13-14). That being said, the metaphor of researcher as painter alludes to the artistic choices all writers make when limning what they see and serves as a constant reminder for me that my hand is inextricably in this work. "In portraiture, the role of the researcher has a personal dimension that cannot be severed from the researcher's professional interests or personal identity…The decisions made, the relationships formed, and the narratives that represent people's lives are deeply connected to the past and present experiences of researchers and the epistemologies concerning the research topic and participants" (Chapman, 2007, p. 158).

Fenwick W. English (2000) is perhaps portraiture's strongest detractor, critiquing what he sees as "the uncontested right of the portraitist/researcher to situate, center, label, and fix in the tinctured hues of verbal descriptive prose what is professed to be 'real'" (p. 21). He claims that portraits are "always presented as a *singular* and *totalizing* picture…the portraitist is characterized as having infinite and totalizing power in presenting an *authentic* view of reality" (p. 23). If these things were true of any given portrait, he would be right to inveigh against them. But I, for one, make no claims that my study has an 'authentic' view of reality (mostly because I don't believe that such a thing exists!), and I'm not entirely convinced that Lawrence-Lightfoot, who responded to critics like English in her article "Reflections on Portraiture: A Dialogue

Between Art and Science" (2005), would claim such a thing either. She might agree with English, as I do, that "the language used to create verbal narratives is not a clear window into any singular reality and therefore a single truth contained in a single story line is illusory" (p. 24). Crafting the single, 'authentic' story is impossible, as each addition and each omission—no matter how small—separates the story that was written from the story that was not: "What gets left out is often as important as what gets included—the blank spaces, the silences, also shape the form of the story" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 10). English also says, "The portraitist is in a position of power…There is a decided inequality between artists and actors" (p. 23), but isn't this true of all researchers? To believe otherwise seems naïve. "All researchers—whether working within the quantitative or qualitative methodological paradigm—are selective in defining and shaping the data they collect and the interpretations that flow from their findings…The shaping hand of the investigator is counterbalanced by the skepticism and scrutiny that is the signature of good research" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 11). Employing this skepticism and scrutiny is the ethical responsibility of all qualitative researchers, including portraitists, for "the creation of a portrait that is unsupported through rigorous scientific research methods indeed would be an inappropriate use of the researcher's authority" (Hackmann, 2002, p. 55).

English (2000) feels that "the summative portrait is beyond reproach. It isn't that the reader cannot form alternative opinions; rather, it is that the reader has no actual means to do so" (p. 22), as (s)he "does not have access to the portraitist's fieldnotes" (p. 24). This is something that is not true for my study. Direct references to my reflective memos and fieldnotes are a frequent and important part of my findings (Chapters 5 and 6). I agree with English that "the truth-telling capacity of the portraitist should be checked" (p. 23) by allowing the participants to

actively enter the discussion and assess the portrayals being made. This is an important part of my research process. I agree with other statements English makes as well, such as, "A portrait is first and foremost the product of the artist-researcher" (p. 25). The difference between me and him is that I think that that's okay—as long as it is recognized and continually challenged: "*Because* the self of the portraitist is so essential to the development of the work, the portraitist must be that much more vigilant about identifying other sources of challenge to her or his perspective" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 11). I also agree with English when he says, "The artist does not see what is there. The artist sees only through the images of gender, culture, social mores, and relationships" (p. 25). But, again, I think this is okay (in fact, I think it's inexorable). I also accept English's critique of portraiture as exceedingly difficult to replicate, due to its deep dependence on the individual investigator's voice. However, at its best, portraiture "reflects an unwavering adherence to the same standards as other research methodologies: authenticity and truth. Even though another investigator's voice and unique imprint on the research report would be different if one were to attempt to replicate the study, the emergent themes identified should remain fairly consistent" (Hackmann, 2002, p. 55). English is also right when he says, "If portraiture were about revealing the presence of simultaneous *multiple truths* it would possess the capability of being reflexive" (p. 26). But—again, at its best—portraiture does this by actively seeking out "the deviant voice[s]" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. 193) that aid in the construction of multiple truths, for "there is never a single story; many could be told" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 10). Lastly, I want to recognize that my advocacy for portraiture makes me "vulnerable to criticism that may strike at [my] personal beliefs and experiences and [my] professional articulation of research" (Chapman, 2007, p. 158). I prepare

for this by maintaining a critical eye on my entire methodology, continually subjecting it to the hard looks and hesitations that keep all good research grounded.

* * *

Below are the details of my inquiry. This plan was greatly informed by a coursework pilot study I conducted on a three-month Story Shop unit in 2011-2012. I repeated many of the processes I used during that pilot, tweaking them as needed and adding new steps that I was either unable to do in the pilot or that I had since learned through further coursework. I address each of these in turn. It is important to note here that some of these tweaks were made in the middle of the process. "With the portraitist's first moves into the setting, the iterative process begins—a dynamic process of receptivity, negotiation, and accommodation" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. 186). This entire journey is captured here, as I believe that "the process *is* the product" (Ely et al, 1997, p. 52).

With Whom?

The fact that I sought out a Title I urban public high school teacher and her students made my sample purposeful in a way. Beyond this, however, the specific students with whom I worked (my team included two other instructors) were chosen randomly from small groups assigned to certain tables by an online randomizer that was then approved by their teacher, making them a stratified random sample (Bernard, 2006, p. 153). The Story Shop finds it helpful to defer to the classroom teacher's expertise and deep knowledge of his/her students in creating (or, in this case, approving) small groups based on who (s)he thinks would work well together both academically and behaviorally. These groups are then randomly assigned a Story Shop instructor who works with them for the majority of the unit. This bit of randomness in my small group assignment was

helpful for the trustworthiness of my research. Over sixteen weeks, I worked with four students (Tajah, an African-American female; Alex, an African-American male; and Tanissa and Dina, both Hispanic females), getting to know them, teaching them the foundations of good storytelling, and helping them choose and craft a story from their lives. These four students and their teacher, Ms. Garcia, (and, of course, I—see "Where Am I In This?" section) were the focus of my study. Since I returned to the high school of my pilot study, I worked with a teacher whom I already knew—not from the pilot study (that teacher has since left the school) but from the school year after it, when I returned for another Story Shop unit. Ms. Garcia is a biracial (white and Mexican-American) second-year teacher in her mid-thirties who came to teaching after many years of professional film and theater work in Los Angeles and New York City. In some ways, the fact that Ms. Garcia and I already knew each other helped my portrait, as we had already built a positive relationship. "At the center of relationships, portraitists hope to build trust and rapport—first, through the search for goodness; second, through empathetic regard; and third, through the development of symmetry, reciprocity, and boundary negotiation with the actors" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. 141). It is important to note, however, that relationships such as this one could also be disadvantages, as they cause both the researcher and the participant to enter into the research with preconceived opinions, both of each other and the work, which could negatively affect the trustworthiness of the project.

How?

My eyes and ears were the primary modes for data collection; I used them to seek out the meanings that people attributed to their actions and surroundings. I used a range of techniques to address my research questions, including survey, interview, focus group, observation, and memo writing.

How does an oral storytelling unit affect both individual students and their classroom relationships?	
(1) How do individual students engage with an oral storytelling unit?	-participant observation (fieldnotes re: changes in communication, attitudes, behavior, etc. + reflective memos)
(2) What is the perceived impact of an oral storytelling unit on classroom relationships?	-participant observation (fieldnotes re: changes in interpersonal interactions, group community, etc. + reflective memos)
(3) How do students perceive the impact of an oral storytelling unit both on their understanding of themselves as individuals and on their relationships with each other?	-focus group interviews with the students (questions re: perceived changes in themselves and/or their relationships, etc.) -classroom community survey (conducted twice—once before and once after the storytelling unit)
(4) How does the teacher perceive the impact of an oral storytelling unit on her individual students and her classroom relationships?	-semi-structured interview with the teacher (questions re: perceived student/relationship changes, etc.) -classroom community survey (conducted twice—once before and once after the storytelling unit)

Figure 3.1 – Questions and Methods Matrix (Maxwell, 2005)

(1) Survey: I agree with Shaffer and Serlin (2004) when they say, "With a modicum of tolerance, qualitative and quantitative inquiry can exist side by side, and even be coordinated in the conduct of research…There is much to be gained for both methods—and for our understanding of research more broadly—from the attempt to close the intellectual distance between those two modes of inquiry" (p. 23). In my pilot study, I gave the teacher an adapted version of Rovai's (2002) Sense of Classroom Community Index (see Appendix 2)—which asks questions about group spirit, trust, interaction, and learning—and it revealed fascinating changes when used as a pretest/posttest before and after the workshop. The quantitative data this survey provided helped confirm the qualitative data I collected through interview and participant observation, thereby strengthening the trustworthiness of my study. It is for this reason that I not only used this survey again with the teacher, but I also added the layer of having the students take it as well. This strengthened my narrative analysis on the relationship between our oral storytelling unit and classroom relationships. It is important to note here, however, that though I

could use the term 'triangulate' to describe what this quantitative survey data brings to my final report, "there is no fixed reality to triangulate…The written document reflects the complex, partial, and multi perspectives that refract meaning for and from the reader" (Ely et al, 1997, p. 35). One clear weakness of this method is that it had the potential to feel detached and impersonal (especially when given as a pretest on the *first day*). At forty questions, I was also worried that it might feel tedious (especially to the students), which could have potentially skewed the results if they had rushed through the questions at the end. I feel that my being present while they completed the surveys (and my allocating plenty of time for them to be completed) helped minimize this, however.

(2) Interview strategy: As I did in my pilot study, I conducted and recorded a semi-structured interview over brunch with the teacher soon after the final showcase of her students' stories. I asked her some pre-prepared questions (see Appendix 1) about the concepts that informed my research (storytelling and identities and storytelling and classroom relationships), but most of our conversation was unstructured and sprang naturally from our discussion. I wanted to conduct the interview this way both to maintain the rapport that I had established with Ms. Garcia and to obtain the specific information that I needed from her (her perceptions). It was helpful to speak with Ms. Garcia once fieldwork had ended and my narrative had started to take shape in my mind. In portraiture, "a story is reconstructed through interview—co-constructed by the interviewer's listening and the interviewee's telling. In creating the final portrait, the story is reconstructed yet again, in its presentation by the portraitist within a particular context. In presenting the story, the portraitist is ever mindful of the intentions of the original storyteller and the responsibility of retelling another's story" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. 118). As is always the case with interviews, a potential weakness of this method is that it could

be considered less reliable than surveying; it is possible that my interview produced skewed data, since it became a conversation during which I revealed some of my own opinions, possibly shaping Ms. Garcia's answers. Through this process, I am continually learning how to "discern [my] own motivations, sensing the difference between legitimate inquiry and voyeurism, between the curiosity that is crucial to probing investigation and the prying that is invasive and presumptive" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. 153).

(3) Focus group: Since conducting my pilot study, I have learned about and practiced conducting focus groups, or interviews of small groups of people (Berg & Lune, 2012). For this study, I conducted two focus groups (two students at a time) with the four students with whom I spent the majority of the storytelling unit. These focus groups were held the days of the students' final showcases, immediately following their class, in an open room down the hallway from their classroom. As with the semi-structured interview, I moderated the conversation with a few pre-planned questions (see Appendix 1) about the concepts that informed my research (storytelling and identities and storytelling and classroom relationships), but most of our conversation was unstructured and sprang naturally from our discussion. "Focus group interviews explicitly use group interactions as part of the data-gathering method" (Berg & Lune, 2012, p. 164), so I paid special attention to the group dynamic, as it was the heart of my data. I asked the students 'meta' questions about how they felt the unit went and how they thought it affected them and their classmates. I had originally planned on doing one focus group with all four of my students, but a snowstorm led to two of them being absent from school the day of the showcase (along with many of their classmates), which forced us to have another set of performances the next day. I returned to the school to see those performances and conduct a focus group with those two students who had been missing. This turned out to be fortuitous, as the two pairs of students said

things they might not otherwise have said had all four of them been together (this is further explained in Chapter 4). “The drawing of the portrait is placed in social and cultural context and shaped through dialogue between the portraitist and the subject, each one negotiating the discourse and shaping the evolving image” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. xv). As with interviews, a potential weakness of this method is that it could be considered less reliable than surveying; it is possible that the focus group produced skewed data, since it became a conversation during which the students and I all revealed some of our opinions, possibly shaping other students’ answers. I was also worried that some students would speak more than others, potentially drowning out others’ opinions, but my role as moderator, the fact that we already knew each other quite well at that point, and the groups being even smaller than I had originally anticipated helped prevent that from happening, I feel.

(4) Observation strategy: Bernard (2006) says participant observation is about “establishing rapport and learning to act so that people go about their business as usual when you show up” (p. 344). Because I wanted to know and understand how an oral storytelling unit (in which I played an active role) affected a group of students and their teacher, participant observation was the most appropriate strategy for me to use in order to form and capture my own perceptions, though I captured some statements/behaviors that shed light on student and teacher perceptions as well. As in my pilot study, I only observed while there once a week as an instructor and not on other days, which meant that I was a full participant and a full observer at all times. While observing, I prioritized events and moments that seemed to fall into the main concepts informing my research (storytelling and identities and storytelling and classroom relationships) while attempting to soak in as much as possible. “Rather than viewing context as a source of distortion, [portraitists] see it as a resource for understanding. The narrative, then, is

always embedded in a particular context…rich in cues about how the actors or subjects negotiate and understand their experience" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. 12). As the lead instructor of the workshop (see "Where Am I In This?" section), I was completely immersed in the process, as "being a *worthy* witness entails being actively engaged in the community" (Winn & Ubiles, 2011, p. 307). I recorded every session and made as many field jottings as I was able to while still being a good instructor. These field jottings were the beginning of my narrative, as "the second we put pen to paper for field log entries, we are already selecting, dropping, or figuring data from the far more complex real thing that we have witnessed in order to tell a credible story" (Ely et al, 1997, p. 19). After each session, I went through the recording and made detailed fieldnotes, including summaries and direct quotations, methodological notes, and theoretical notes. Ely et al (1997) might call the latter two "analytic memos," which they say help researchers "to examine from various vantage points the objects, articulations, events, and people within our research studies…[and] become vehicles through which we shape the lived experience" (p. 30). I always typed up my fieldnotes within twenty-four hours in order to preserve as much detail as possible, such as remembering the body language behind 'dead air' in the recording. "Listening for voice not only requires listening, watching, and questioning, it also requires that the portraitist be attentive to silences" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. 100). Using participant observation strengthened the trustworthiness of my study because this method "reduces the problem of reactivity—of people changing their behavior when they know that they are being studied…[it] gives you an intuitive understanding of what's going on in a culture and allows you to speak with confidence about the meaning of data" (Bernard, 2006, p. 354-55). Winn and Ubiles (2011) remind us that "when students and researchers work side by side, the bonds of mutual respect and understanding allow a new practice to evolve in

which the researcher is fellow traveler, journalist, critic, and contributor" (p. 303). It is important to note here, however, that while participant observation fieldnotes "constitute the reservoir of 'facts' with which we make ongoing meaning, they are not impersonal descriptors. Instead, the fieldnotes are the written record of the data as shaped through the researcher's eyes, with all that this implies about the way individuals see the world, how they interpret what they see, both explicitly and implicitly, and why" (Ely et al, 1997, p. 17). So the obvious weakness of this method is that it is subjective.

(5) Reflective memos: Bernard (2006) refers to researcher self-reflection notes as "a place where you can run and hide when things get tough…it will give you information that will help you interpret your fieldnotes and will make you aware of your personal biases" (p. 391). Lankshear & Knobel (2004) define memos as "reflections on what was seen or heard, connections drawn between previous days' data collection…records of hunches and tentative interpretations…space for recording emotional responses to the research act…[and] a space for interrogating, as much as possible, various roles as researcher and learner, and the biases and research expectations held" (p. 190). Ely et al (1997) say that reflective memos further acquaintance researchers to their multiple stances (p. 349) and "help us to critique our own work and to develop insights or directions…to tease out assumptions, to find more questions, to gain insights about self as researcher, and to find the encouragement to keep the search going" (p. 28). As in the pilot study, I jotted personal notes on the days I taught, but I also added formal self-reflection memos when typing up my fieldnotes. These recordings became "the footprints of [my] thoughts as they progressed over time" (p. 20). They helped me be more reflective, and they aided me in processing what I was learning. It is important to point out, however, that a weakness of this method is that it is even more subjective than participant observation.

Then What?

In qualitative research, "the act of collecting and making sense of the data continues beyond the time spent at a site or interacting with a subject, throughout the actual writing of the finished product" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. 60). This is an active, purposeful process, during which the researcher must be constantly aware that she is constructing meaning. I agree with Ely et al (1997) when they say, "Instead of an attempt to *find* or *see* meaning 'in the data' it is far more productive to *compose* meaning that the data may lead us to understand. In life, we create our own reality out of persons or situations; it isn't that the person or situation is *the reality*" (p. 20). My data included fieldnotes on fifteen class sessions of participant observation, a teacher interview, and two focus group interviews, complete with self-reflection memos and methodological/theoretical notes. These fieldnotes joined pretest/posttest survey results from the teacher and the students.

To analyze the survey results, I followed Rovai's (2002) scoring key (see Appendices 2-3) to determine the teacher and student 'Sense of Classroom Community Index Scores' both times they took the survey. I then calculated the difference—both in their 'overall scores' and in their 'subset scores'—between the pretest results and the posttest results and incorporated that quantitative analysis into the narrative analysis of the teacher's, the students', and my own perceptions of the storytelling unit's impact on classroom relationships (see Chapter 4). This provided me with an important and less subjective path to some of my conclusions. "The effort to reach coherence must flow organically both from the data and from the interpretive witness of the portraitist" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. 12).

In order to analyze my fieldnotes, I first read through everything multiple times, composing themes and topics that emerged for me. "The emergent themes—arising out of

scattered pieces—mark the interpretive reflections of the portraitist. Hearing the stories and witnessing the action, then reflecting on their meaning and relationship to one another, the researcher begins to see the patterns" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. 210). I eventually went through and color-coded my fieldnotes according to three major categories: classroom relationships, shifts in behavior/attitudes, and navigating identities. This process was repeated, cyclically, until the categories started to feel right. Then the color-coded chunks were arranged in two separate ways: chronologically and according to the individual(s) to whom they pertained. As in my pilot study, looking at the summaries, direct quotations, and researcher notes this way allowed me to identify and keep track of patterns and connections, eventually leading to narrative analysis Chapters 4 and 5. After Ely et al (1997), my narrative includes anecdotes (stories of events that have "nugget[s] of meaning" (p. 65)), vignettes ("narrative investigations that carry within them an interpretation of the person, experience, or situation that the writer describes" (p. 70)), and layered stories (complex and sometimes contradictory stories that give my report a multivocality and "reflect the diverse ways through which experience is interpreted and constructed" (p. 80)). My narrative analysis was rounded out by my interpreting the meanings I found through larger, theoretical contexts: "Interpretations arise when patterns, themes, and issues are discerned in the data and when these findings are seen in relation to one another and against larger theoretical perspectives—our own newly emergent views or those to be found in 'the literature'" (p. 160).

In my pilot study, though I worked with and closely observed all of the students in my small group, I eventually decided that my analysis addressing both the perceived impact of the storytelling unit on students and the students' engagement with the unit would revolve around only two of those students. This is because, as the patterns and connections began to emerge, I

realized that those two students not only engaged with and were impacted by the unit in two very different ways, but when combined, their narratives represented well the experience of the entire group, making them powerful enough to stand on their own. This time, my analysis includes the experiences of all four of the students in my small group, as they each had significant and unique ways of engaging in the experience.

Is This Trustworthy?

Because of the paradigms in which I worked and the nature of the particular type of qualitative research that I did, Shenton's (2004) approach to ensuring trustworthiness is an appropriate way to evaluate this inquiry. (1) Credibility: My research methods were well established; I was very familiar with urban public high school culture, having taught in that environment for ten years; my sample of students was somewhat random; my data was 'triangulated' by using multiple methods; I encouraged all participants to participate freely and frankly; I was regularly debriefed by my colleagues, who offered scrutiny of my project; my research memos were reflective and addressed my perspectives and biases; my report includes thick description; and I examined previous research findings before I began. (2) Transferability: I am confident—based on my previous experience, my reading of previous research, and my pilot study—that my findings are transferable to similar contexts/populations. (3) Dependability: My report includes my research design, the operational detail of my data gathering, and a reflective appraisal of the project. (4) Confirmability: I worked to ensure that, as far as possible, my work's findings were the result of the experiences and ideas of my participants rather than my own characteristics and preferences. This study was also recursive, in that there was a "continuous interaction between data (induction) and hunches or hypotheses (deduction)" (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010, p. 19), which allowed me to avoid a myopic, biased view of my data.

With What Limitations?

"Portraits are not designed to be documents of idealization or celebration. In examining the dimensionality and complexity of goodness there will, of course, be ample evidence of vulnerability and weakness" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. 9). Even though I was able to identify certain changes in student identity development and classroom relationships after the implementation of this storytelling unit, there is no way for me to prove that other factors did not cause or help cause those changes. Bernard (2006) refers to these other factors as confounds, and some of the ones he describes could have potentially skewed my data: (1) "The history confound refers to any independent variable, other than the treatment that (i) occurs between the pretest and the posttest in an experiment and (ii) affects the experimental groups differently" (p. 114), (2) "The maturation confound refers to the fact that people in any experiment grow older or get more experienced while you are trying to conduct an experiment" (p. 114-15), and (3) "The testing confound happens when people change their responses in reaction to being constantly examined" (p. 115). Also, as Maxwell (2005) notes, "Qualitative researchers sometimes rely on a small number of informants for a major part of their data, and even when these informants are purposefully selected and the data themselves seem valid, there is no guarantee that these informants' views are typical" (p. 91). This is even more of a concern for my study, considering my data analysis revolves around one teacher and the relatively small group of students with whom I worked.

Where Am I In This?

Maxwell (2005) defines reflexivity as "the fact that the researcher is part of the world he or she studies" (p. 109). He stresses the importance of confronting my possible biases (p. 108), a charge that I take seriously, for—like all researchers—I "face ethical dilemmas and a great moral

responsibility" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. 11). Part of that responsibility is to maintain a keen awareness of how my own beliefs are affecting my study, as "it is not only important for the portraitist to paint the contours and dimensions of the setting, it is also crucial that she sketch herself into the context" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. 50). Ely et al (1997) use the term 'stance' to refer to "the various perspectives through which we frame the collection and interpretation of data…[and] that influence how and what we see and the interpretations in writing that arise from that seeing" (p. 32). I acknowledge my stance, or positionality—that I was both "inside and outside [my] research site" (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010, p. 31), and that I entered into this research with preconceived notions of the benefits of oral storytelling (though I was open to having those notions challenged and welcomed the ways in which this research process reached inward and "tuned" my sense of self (Ely et al, 1997, p. 329)). I am committed to portraying myself, the students, and the teacher with whom I worked as "less than heroic" (Ely et al, 1997, p. 355). And I understand that my role as an instructor, though helpful in allowing me to form relationships with the students and teacher with whom I worked, also worked as a limitation in that it undoubtedly influenced the data I collected. Finally, everything written in the pages of this study is passed through the lens of my own experiences, biases, and beliefs, no matter how objective it may sometimes claim to be. I recognize this challenge and have chosen to consciously and actively confront it on every page.

Chapter 4: Storytelling and Classroom Relationships

What follows is a narrative analysis of the perceived impact that this oral storytelling unit had on relationships in the classroom—both within my small group and within the class as a whole. It addresses my, Ms. Garcia's, and the students' perceptions of how this sixteen-week workshop affected the teacher(s) ←→ student(s) and student(s) ←→ student(s) relationships in the room. Of course, the following pages include no small amount of my own journey as well. I use footnotes to separate much of my reflections and conceptual grappling in an attempt to avoid interruptions of the classroom narrative (or, more important, the student/teacher voices) as much as possible.

"One True Thing"

If narrative is the major link between us and the social world (Bruner, 1986), then every story we tell—no matter how small—both informs and is informed by our relationship(s) with the person(s) listening. We hear each other's stories, play in the gaps, and muddy them with our own experiences, our preconceived assumptions, and our own interpretations of the storytellers' words. In this way, our relationships—our emotional connections to each other—shift with every story we tell and every story we hear. These shifts can be positive or negative (or both), but insomuch as I believe that relationships are the currency of classroom instruction (in that they can be banked on for both classroom management and academic purposes), I believe that any work that could potentially cause positive shifts in our classroom relationships is work worth doing. The Story Shop believes this as well.

The first session of nearly every Story Shop unit includes an activity called "One True Thing," wherein the students, teacher, and storytelling instructors all sit in a circle and take turns sharing small things about themselves that they don't think anyone else in the room already

knows. The idea is to take 'baby steps' toward being more open with each other[3]. On our first visit, I introduce the "One True Thing" activity and share first: "I can never finish a Popsicle. I can't stand the texture of the wooden stick. Maybe it's because I had some bad experiences at the doctor's office when I was little." Linda and Janet, my assistant storytelling instructors, share next. Linda likes to give free advice to strangers in Washington Square Park; Janet is superstitious whenever the minute hand of a clock is on thirteen. Then Ms. Garcia tells us that when her husband isn't home and she's alone in the apartment, she likes to choreograph dance routines to pop songs in her living room. She demonstrates for us ("six, seven, eight!"), and we all laugh. Then the students start sharing.

At first, their statements feel more informational than anything ("I like cartoons," "I play basketball," "I love babies"), but by the time we get to the second round, their shares start to feel a little more personal. On my second turn, I tell them that I was raised in a conservative, military household in Texas and that I feel *very* different from everyone else in my family. Nwoye tells us that he hates the sight of blood. Nyeia likes to blast music and pretend she's the lead vocalist of a rock band. Roger is addicted to brushing his hair ("Sometimes, I gotta separate myself from my brush"). Terrain plans *months* in advance for events that he's excited about.

[3] This is a good place to discuss Story Shop's desire for students to open up at all. Why is this a goal in the first place? The Story Shop's mission is to foster development, community, and creative expression through the art and craft of storytelling. The Story Shop believes that (1) processing experience through narrative can provide personal insight, (2) listening to stories can connect listeners to human experiences that are both personal and universal, and (3) a community can be strengthened when its members share their stories with one another (source: Story Shop internal documents). (For details on Story Shop workshop participant rights and responsibilities, please see the description of the Bill of Rights on pg. 70-71.) All Story Shop instructors are expected to uphold this mission and share these beliefs. The Story Shop believes that the sharing of stories can build perspective and community, but that storytelling can also be a vulnerable and emotionally fraught process, which should not be taken lightly. It is therefore The Story Shop's responsibility to create a space wherein this process can occur as safely as possible. The "One True Thing" activity is part of that process—a relatively safe (compared to telling a five-minute story) activity during which students can share small parts of themselves with each other.

"Do you see what's happening?" I ask when it gets back around to me. "Little stories are coming out 'cause we're just telling tiny true things about ourselves."[4] They nod in agreement. On the train ride home, I wonder why it is that when teachers share personal things about themselves, students seem more likely to do the same. Are they just taking our lead—giving us what they think we want to hear—or do they genuinely want to share? Are the things the students shared with us really 'true'?[5] Storytelling is a communal act (Richter, 1996), and the social aspect of storytelling can sometimes lead to our making changes to our stories in an attempt to appear more likeable or deserving of sympathy (Lehrer, 2011; Edelson, Sharot, Dolan, & Dudai, 2011). But despite this potential for façade, do activities like "One True Thing" still have value in the classroom? I believe so.

On our second visit, Ms. Garcia opens class by asking if anyone can remember something someone shared last week. Multiple hands go up, and three students proceed to recall—nearly word for word—what their colleagues had said seven days before. When I sat down with Ms. Garcia over brunch three months later, the "One True Thing" activity was one of the first things she brought up: "We start out just getting students comfortable with just talking about themselves in small ways…So students who maybe hear the word 'storytelling' or 'personal storytelling,' who are maybe turned off by that—'I don't have any stories,' or 'I'm not telling a story,' or 'I hate this class,' or 'I hate you,' or 'I hate everything'—it gets them telling stories

[4] To push back on The Story Shop's philosophies and mission, why should students have an obligation to tell us anything about their lives? Why do we assume that personal storytelling will be so great for students? Is it because we feel it's been great for us, so we want to believe that it will be great for them too? What if it doesn't turn out to be? Sometimes—particularly as a researcher whose work is devoted to something to which I'm so personally attached—I become blind to the idea that what I think and feel about storytelling may not be true for everyone. Why should every Story Shop student have to share a personal story? Perhaps we should offer alternatives, such as telling a fictional story or giving a presentation on something they've researched or explored.

[5] Does it matter? For more on the murkiness of 'truth', please see footnote [172] in Tajah's strand.

without realizing that they're doing it[6], because it's just a fun activity. That's how it starts, just building that community."[7]

Teacher Stories

An important part of any storytelling unit is the teacher's sharing of his/her own stories (Dutro, 2011; Coles, 1989; Kazemek, 1985; Greene, 1991; Remnick, 2014). Teacher stories can act as models, on both a structural level (i.e., what makes a good story?) and an emotional level (i.e., what does it feel like to tell a story?). It is also important to demonstrate to students that we aren't asking them to do anything that we aren't willing to do ourselves (English, 2001). On our second visit, I share a story with the class about my middle school bully, Cliff Landers[8]. I open by telling them about the bamboo forest that grew in an abandoned corner of the elementary school playground across from my childhood home. This place was sacred to me and my brothers. I spent hours playing in it, well into middle school, when I—still hopelessly prepubescent—lagged far behind the other girls at school, and my flat chest was often the subject of merciless teasing, especially by the reigning king of the school bus, Cliff Landers.

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[6] This is very interesting wording here. Is our objective to 'trick' students into sharing stories? Even if it's not our objective, is it something that we do? If so, I find that problematic; my teaching philosophy prefers transparency to deception. I did say, "Little stories are coming out 'cause we're just telling tiny true things about ourselves," but not until *after* all of the students had shared.

[7] Whatever Ms. Garcia's definition of 'community' may be here, she clearly sees it as a positive thing that "One True Thing" can help build in a classroom. Hearing each other's stories can definitely make students more *aware* of each other (Rosen & Rosen, 1988), but that awareness is by no means guaranteed to have positive effects. Still, community identities are created, shaped, and revealed through teller-told transactions (Bruner, 1990; Humphreys, 2000), so every opportunity we give our students to share something about themselves—no matter how small—is a potentially worthwhile one to take. We just need to realize that doing so could have negative effects too and that, either way, community identities take time to form; they aren't the kinds of things created in one day through one activity.

[8] I should note here that though the story I chose to share with them had lighthearted moments, it also included quite a bit of emotional vulnerability. In sharing our own stories, it is important for teachers to choose carefully. What kind of emotional bar are we setting? Do the students know that their stories don't have to match the intensity of ours—that stories can also entertain and celebrate? We should work to share stories with a range of subject matters and intensities. (For more on this, please see the discussion of Janet's story on pgs. 68-69.)

I tell the class that, because we were so poor, all of the clothes that my brothers and I wore growing up were from the thrift store. I didn't know to be ashamed of this. I actually enjoyed our trips there, including the time in seventh grade that I found a shirt I loved. It was white and off the shoulder and covered in tiny eyelets and ruffles. It was the perfect eighties find. I remember looking at myself in the mirror of their changing area and actually thinking—for perhaps the first time in my life—that I looked pretty.

When I wore this shirt to school the next Monday, I soaked up every compliment and held my head high, even when I boarded the afternoon bus home, a time when I was usually at my most nervous and afraid. My confidence left me unguarded when Cliff suddenly stood up from his seat, blocking my way down the aisle. I stopped breathing, and my heart started beating wildly. (At this point in the story, some of the students lean forward in their seats, waiting to hear what Cliff will say to me. They've been silent the entire time.)

"Are you not wearing a bra under that shirt, Christine?"

"Of course I am," I said, trying to save face—like, *"Why wouldn't I be? I'm thirteen."*

"No you're not," he said with a sneer, reaching out with both hands to grab the sleeves of my shirt and yank them down—to prove to the entire bus that not only was I not wearing a bra, I wasn't wearing anything under that shirt. (Some of the students gasp. One of the girls says, "Oh, *hell* no.")

I tell them that a wave of laughter started with Cliff and eventually filled the entire bus, smothering me in hot, burning shame. I pulled my shirt back up and sank down into the seat, clenching my jaw so tight that it felt like my teeth might explode out of my mouth. I was determined not to let Cliff see me cry. When the bus pulled up to my corner, I got out and started running across the park toward an increasingly blurry patch of green. I pushed my way through

the bamboo forest, collapsed into a fetal position in the middle of a clearing, and *sobbed*. I eventually fell asleep to the sound of the hollow stems knocking together in the wind, and by the time my mom called me in for dinner, I knew that I was going to be okay.

I thank the students for listening, and they applaud and 'poetry snap' (which I had encouraged them to do during "One True Thing" the week before) as I take my seat. Linda then leads the class in a discussion about what the students noticed.

"You felt the story," Miranda says. "You were confident to tell the story. You didn't just feel it yourself; you know how to make *everyone* in the room feel like you were feelin'."[9]

Linda asks them what they think the main relationship in my story was.

Terrain says, "Cliff," but multiple other students disagree.

"Herself," they say, impressing me with their ability to look below the surface of a story already.

Jessica says, "She was taking risks. That's something that's very personal, something to relive that's really kind of horrifying. So for her to sit there and be so comfortable with us enough to share that story was—the stakes were high."[10] Linda agrees with Jessica, adding that

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[9] Roemer (1995) tells us that storytelling can join the teller with her audience, which Miranda seems to be articulating here. But what does it mean to be 'joined' with a storyteller? Perhaps my story about being utterly humiliated made her feel utterly humiliated right there along with thirteen-year-old me. Or perhaps my story mentally transported her back to a time when she had been utterly humiliated herself. Or perhaps Miranda meant something else entirely here. What does it mean to 'feel like [a storyteller is] feelin',' particularly if the experience being limned is a negative one? Can positive feelings of human connection come from sharing stories about negative experiences? I believe so, but surely stories are also capable of causing great interpersonal damage. What responsibilities do storytellers have to their audience? Do those responsibilities end when their story does, or do they extend beyond the telling and into their audience's listening/interpretation? In what ways are storyteller responsibilities different within the teacher-student power dynamic? These are just a few of the many important questions to be considered when implementing an oral storytelling unit in the classroom.

[10] Rymes (2003) and Read & Read (1998) believe that teacher vulnerability helps even out the power deferential in the classroom. A common classroom dynamic is for the teacher to have most (if not all) of the power and for the students to have little to none of it. Telling a personal story can involve the relinquishing of some of that teacher power. It can allow our students to see us as more human, and it can grant them the sense of power that sometimes comes with knowing that someone trusts you with a piece of herself. It can also, however, open the teacher up to potential abuse of that power. Sensitive stories can be used as weapons against their tellers. Storytelling involves no small amount of risk. (But can trust exist without risk? Please see footnote [19].)

she felt a kind of serenity in the room at the end. Listening from the sidelines, I write in my notebook, "They're noticing that vulnerability can build community and trust."

Just then, Tanissa says, "We're all gonna look him up" and everyone laughs.

Jessica agrees: "Yeah, New York ain't the yellow bus!" We all laugh harder.[11]

When I dismiss class a few minutes later, I thank them for their attention, and they respond with applause. Three weeks later, when Ms. Garcia tells me that she had played the pilot episode of *The Wonder Years* for them during a class activity and that more than one of them had compared the scene where he runs into the woods to my story of the bamboo refuge of my childhood, I can't help but smile.

On our third visit, Linda shares a story with the class. She tells us how she found herself in the middle of an emotionally abusive relationship that she couldn't bring herself to end until it crossed the line into physical abuse and he choked her in the shower[12]. She explains how this relationship is what inspired her to sit in Washington Square Park every Sunday with a sign that says, "Free Advice Girl" and talk to strangers in need of guidance. She hopes that this public service will allow more people to learn from her experiences. When her story is finished, the room poetry snaps, and I stand to lead a discussion about what the students noticed.

[11] King (2011) says that hearing each other's stories can build empathy and understanding, both of which I definitely feel sitting in the room at that moment. These students didn't even know I existed eight days ago, and yet here they are, [hypothetically] defending me against a bully from twenty years ago. I was so honored by the thoughtfulness, honesty, and effort they put into this discussion; it endeared me to them. Much of my focus has been on the potential benefits of teacher stories to students, but I wonder if teacher stories can increase teacher investment as well.

[12] It is important to note here that sharing a story like this comes with no small amount of risk. What if listening to a story about abuse constitutes abuse to one of the students listening? What if it makes him/her think about or remember something (s)he doesn't want to? These things should be considered before the decision to share a story like this is made. My team and I did not consider this (I did not know what Linda's story would be about ahead of time), which was a mistake. For more on the potential consequences of sharing stories about abuse, please see the discussion of Angelica's story and Alethea's response to it on pg. 97-98.

Miranda says, "She was able to get up there and feel the trust in the room." She adds that Linda's story made her "*know* how that felt."[13] I tell them that the trust in the room is something that they had built; I had felt it myself the week before. Later, I write in my fieldnotes, "They're noticing that good storytelling feeds on group trust."

Miranda also points out how different Linda's storytelling style was from mine last week. We discuss how Linda has a strong but quiet presence, while I am more demonstrative and loud. I thank Miranda for pointing that out, saying that everyone is different, and we want them to tell their stories their own way: "It's okay for you to just own the way you talk in real life." I contrast what we're trying to do with what teachers often do, which is try to make students talk and act like they do: "Oral storytelling banks on the way that you talk anyway. And school so rarely just lets you talk."[14]

Miranda says, "We were taught to follow behind what the teacher shows us. We follow the road that we've been led down instead of what we find." I'm impressed.

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[13] Miranda's response here brings up similar questions to those that her comment after my story did (see footnote [9]). Sharing a personal story can cause members of the audience to empathically experience what you have experienced, potentially creating and strengthening social bonds (Eakin, 2008; Pennebaker, 1990; Dotinga, 2012; Johnson & Freedman, 2001), but that empathic experience may not always be a good thing. It is also important to note here that Miranda's response to Linda's story is not necessarily representative of everyone in the room. There very well may have been students who were made uncomfortable by Linda's story but did not say anything. (It is also interesting to note that what Miranda says here after Linda's story (that the story made her *know* how that felt) is slightly different from what she said after my story (that my story made her *feel* what I was feeling). It's a subtle distinction but a potentially important one. Perhaps the difference between emotionally connecting with a story and intellectually connecting with it depends on whether you've ever experienced something similar yourself. Is true empathy possible if/when a storyteller's experience is radically different from your own?)

[14] This is one of the reasons I think bringing oral storytelling into the classroom is such a worthwhile thing to do. It's one of the rare times in school when students don't have to speak/write in Standard English, so other dialects—such as African American Vernacular English, Spanglish, etc.—can be showcased and honored. In this way, storytelling units can help students own and display their individuality. I like that we were able to talk about this a little bit, but there was a much deeper conversation to be had here—one about the culture of power at large and how it plays out in public education.

Dylan[15] raises his hand to say that Linda's eye contact "made you, like, wanna be engaged in her story more." I tell him he has a point—eye contact is one of the ways that we connect as humans, which is why McCaleb (2003) says that face-to-face storytelling is "the language of relationship." Once again, the students applaud at the end of class.

When I sat down with the members of my small group three months later, all four of them brought up the fact that the instructors had shared their stories first. I talked to Alex and Tajah first. When Tajah told me that the storytelling unit had "opened [her] up a lot," I asked her how. She said, "When you and the other ladies, when you told your personal stories, I thought, a'ight. If they can sit here and tell they personal stories—somethin' that made y'all still kinda feel bad and think about it, and it's personal. Like, y'all came and y'all shared it with a bunch of kids that y'all don't even really know like that. So it was like, if y'all can do that, then I can do that too. I just gotta be mature about it."

When I asked Alex for his reaction to the unit, starting with the first day, he said, "I wasn't really affected at first. I didn't really care, to be honest, until deeper into the semester, where people started telling they personal stories, and I'm like, 'Wow. That's interesting.' Y'know?" I asked if there was a specific day that marked the beginning of that shift. "You caught my attention, but she [Linda] really pulled me in…I'm like, 'Wow. That's a big thing!' And nobody went outside. We never talked about it. We talked about it in the classroom, but when we left that classroom, nobody talked about it in school. Like, it didn't come up in our everyday conversation *ever*. And that's what I was tryin'a pay attention for. Like, 'Yeah, people

[15] After our fifth visit, Ms. Garcia told me that Dylan and Tajah had gone to the principal after our first visit to complain about the class and ask to be transferred out. She said they wanted to be removed because they didn't want to tell stories about themselves, but that the principal had denied their request. By the time she told me this, Dylan and Tajah were already in small groups, working on stories. When I checked in with Tajah, she told me she wanted to keep working on her story. When I checked in with Dylan, he said, "I don't want to tell a story." I told him (and his small group leader, Linda) that he didn't have to; he could just listen to and help the other students in his small group. (For more on Dylan, please see pgs. 91-92 and pg. 94.)

are gonna talk about this,' but nobody talked about it. So I'm like, 'Alright. I guess I can trust these people in this class.'"[16]

When I sat down with Dina and Tanissa the next day, however, they had a different take on our 'model' stories. Tanissa said, "I remember when you first started performing to us, I'm like, 'They make it seem so easy.'…I'm just sitting here like, 'Wow. What do they expect me to do the first time I go up there?'"

Dina agreed: "Let's say you're going onstage, and the best singer in the world goes onstage before you. You're like, 'Nope!'" So it's important to recognize that sometimes—instead of serving as models or encouragement—teacher stories can intimidate and/or discourage students.[17]

On our fourth visit, Ms. Garcia shares a story. It's about her high school boyfriend, who was black, her mother's surprisingly racist reaction to finding that out (surprising because Ms. Garcia's mother, a white woman, had married Ms. Garcia's father, a Mexican-American man), and Ms. Garcia's standing up to that racism. At one particularly heavy point in her story, Ms. Garcia's eyes well up with tears. "She's saying I can't date somebody because of their race?…My mother was my idol. I loved my mother. To have my mother say that to me was heartbreaking."[18] The room is pin-drop silent for the few seconds it takes Ms. Garcia to gather

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[16] So for both Tajah and Alex, it was important that the teachers shared first. It helped establish their classroom as a potentially safe space. It's interesting to me that Alex expected everyone to talk about Linda's story outside of class despite our explicit requests that they not. It makes me wonder how my preconceived notions of the positive relationship between sharing personal stories and the creating of a sense of safety affected my read of Ms. Garcia's classroom. Then again, Alex says no one did talk about it (as far as he knows, of course—they very well may have).

[17] Tonkin (1992) reminds us that the interaction between teller and audience is not always a positive one. It's interesting that, in teaching writing, I never use my own writing as a model. I always use a student's writing because it offers more authenticity and encouragement. Why, then, was I so quick to think a teacher model would work best for storytelling? Is it because I assumed that most students are already skilled storytellers and so wouldn't be intimidated by teacher stories? Tanissa and Dina point out yet another example here of how assumptions can blind.

[18] In hindsight, putting Ms. Garcia's story after Linda's was not the best decision. Though Ms. Garcia's story had some lighthearted moments (she made the students laugh multiple times), it was clearly heavy enough to make her

herself. Everyone's eyes are on her. I can feel the emotion in our circle. When she finishes and sits down to a burst of poetry snaps, I ask the students for their comments.

Kyra notes how brave it was for Ms. Garcia to share that story with them. Once again, I credit the class for making the storyteller feel safe: "She trusted you guys because you guys have built a community that's supportive…It's getting easier for people to stand up and tell stories that are kind of hard."[19]

Miranda says, "I felt what she felt…I could feel her breaking down on the inside, so it touched me…I feel like the energy was flowing around the room slowly." So I was not the only person who felt this.

Alex says, "When you tell a story like that, you really have to trust. Like, that's trust right there." I agree, saying that it was brave of her to tell a family story that didn't make her family look awesome.

At the end of class, when I ask them to share 'memorable moments' (something from that day's class that they think they'll carry with them), Angelica says, "How emotional she [Ms. Garcia] got. I felt it."

Jessica says, "You felt everyone in the class emotionally just cry."[20]

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cry. Putting this story after Linda's incredibly emotional story about domestic abuse (and my relatively vulnerable story about my middle school bully) might have given the students the impression that The Story Shop believes that the only stories worth telling are painful ones, which could not be further from the truth. Again, it is important that model stories be carefully curated to represent a wide range of emotional intensities. (For more on this, please see the discussion of Janet's story on pgs. 68-69.)

[19] I wonder what the relationship is between the feeling of safety and the sharing of extremely personal stories. Does the latter create the former, or does the former allow the latter? Both? Can a feeling of safety be built up with less risky, more lighthearted stories too? Or—like the clichéd 'trust falls' in the summer camps of my youth—does trust require vulnerability to prove that it's there? (If I don't fall, how will I know you'll catch me?) I don't know the answers to these questions.

[20] Jessica says this as if it were a good thing, and perhaps it was for her. But I wonder if listening to an extremely sad story about an incredibly painful thing—especially if it's told with great emotion—can overwhelm one's emotional circuit board in a way. By evoking one main feeling, deeply sad stories can distract us from noticing and discussing the more nuanced ways in which we experience everyday life. This doesn't necessarily mean that sad stories aren't

Kyra says, "How even though she was young, she still stood up for what she believed in," prompting a burst of poetry snaps from the class. Later, I write in my fieldnotes, "There's some real community here!"

When Tajah and Alex spoke so highly of the instructor stories during our focus group interview, I asked them specifically about Ms. Garcia. "I ain't really mess with Ms. Garcia," Alex said.

"I still don't mess wit her like that, I'm sorry," Tajah interrupted.[21]

"I didn't know her," Alex continued. "Story Shop made me like Ms. Garcia more. Probably because she shared her own story, and if y'all didn't come this year, she probably wouldn't have did that, so y'all helped out in the fact that me and her, y'know, our relationship grew, teacher to student."[22]

Tajah says, "We have no relationship…The one thing I could say that's good about her is that she do care about her students' grade. She nags to the point where you just get up and do it. And then, after a while, I calm down. I relax. I actually like what we're doin'. I just didn't wanna do it, but bein' that you pushin' me to do it, I'ma just learn to like it."[23]

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worth sharing (I believe they can be); it just means that this is yet another concern to keep in mind when choosing stories to share with students.

[21] In this exchange, Alex seems to be speaking in the past tense (so "I ain't really mess with Ms. Garcia" would mean that he didn't used to care about her much) and Tajah is saying that she "still [doesn't] mess wit her like that" (i.e., she still doesn't care about her much), which seems to be confirmed by her next statement, also in the present tense: "We have no relationship." It's sobering that this storytelling unit did not seem to affect Tajah's relationship with Ms. Garcia at all.

[22] I have no way of knowing how much Alex's self-proclaimed growth in his relationship with Ms. Garcia will affect his learning and/or his academic performance in her class, but my hope is that it will bring some of the benefits that Johnson & Freedman (2001), Phelan (1991), Read & Read (1998), Zander (2007), Rosen & Rosen (1988), and Kuyvenhoven (2009) suggested storytelling units can cause in classrooms, such as increased attendance, participation, and work ethic. (Even if it does, however, we can never know how many of those benefits could be attributed to the storytelling unit and how many could be attributed to something else (Bernard, 2006).)

[23] So storytelling units can bring students closer to their teacher, but they don't always. Alex's experience is supported by some of the literature on the importance of teachers sharing their own stories with students (Dutro, 2011; Coles, 1989; Kazemek, 1985; Greene, 1991; Remnick, 2014), but Tajah's experience is no less important to

In my interview with Ms. Garcia, she mentioned feeling a sense of trust grow in her room throughout the storytelling unit. When I asked what she thought led to that sense of trust, she said, "If you're willing, especially as a facilitator, if you're willing to share a part of yourself, if you can really let yourself show a vulnerable side of you, that helps them not be as afraid. Because it's like, 'Oh. If she can do that, it's cool.' And plus, it makes them feel closer to you. Because they know something about you. I think the biggest thing for them is that if they don't, they feel alienated. 'You're asking me to do all these things, and I don't know anything about you?' You're not asking them something that you're not willing to do yourself. I think that's huge. It makes a big difference."[24]

Janet is the last of the storytelling instructors to share a story with the class. She admits before beginning that she has never told a story in front of a live audience before. The class poetry snaps to give her encouragement. She tells us about her prom night—how excited she had been, how much the night had been built up, and how it ended up being a disaster. Throughout her story, I catch Dylan smiling multiple times. At one point, Janet says she was going to ask her crush, Eric, to the prom, but she was beaten to the punch by "Debra Martinez, who was very *developed*." She tells us that she daydreamed of showing up to the prom "looking like Drew Barrymore in *Ever After*" and having Eric say, "Ugh, I messed up!" This line makes Dylan laugh

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this research. It is important to remember that teacher sharing is not always a positive experience (in fact, according Tanissa and Dina, it can sometimes be a *negative* experience), so the potential benefits should always be weighed against the potential consequences. The decision to implement a storytelling unit should never be made lightly.

[24] Ms. Garcia clearly feels that when a teacher shares his/her own stories, it can lead to students feeling closer to him/her (which Alex's statement on pg. 67 supports). She also believes in the importance of a teacher being willing to do the things that (s)he asks his/her students to do. I couldn't agree more. (I also want to note that although Tajah's statement about Ms. Garcia on pg. 67 seems to contradict Ms. Garcia's statement here about stories leading to feelings of closeness, that doesn't make Ms. Garcia's—or Tajah's—perception any less valid.)

out loud, and I write in my notebook, "I love how hard Dylan tries to act like he hates this class, when he so clearly has moments of enjoying himself."[25]

When Janet's story is over, Dylan is one of the first to raise his hand. "She used a lot of body language to show what she was doin'." When I ask him for a specific example, he says, "She was like this with the dress [he runs his hands sensually down his torso]." This image was *so funny*. The whole room laughed—perhaps none harder than Janet.

The relative lightheartedness of Janet's story came up in my interview with Ms. Garcia. She said, "What was great about this [workshop] is that each teaching artist actually got up and shared a story—something that they had crafted, something that was personal to them. And it was cool because it was a really nice array of experiences, and I would say emotional intensity. So some were a little more emotional, some were lighthearted. And it gave the students a really great model—to see this is where we're headed, and hopefully kind of break down any fears or make it a little less scary and a little more exciting."[26]

Storytelling and My Small Group Relationships

On our fifth visit, we split the class into permanent small groups (four groups of four, assigned using an online randomizer and approved by Ms. Garcia). Tanissa, Dina, Alex, and Tajah end up with me. I immediately wonder what dynamic these four will end up having together. I'd been in their class for a month, and it seemed as if Tanissa and Dina were close friends, and Alex and Tajah were close friends, but that the two pairs never voluntarily mixed.

[25] I wonder if there isn't something a bit irresistible about a good story. Perhaps, as Hawkes (2010) argues, storytelling's potential irresistibility comes from its ability to tap into humanity's long history of fire-lit tales. (Of course, just because Dylan is having fun at any given moment doesn't mean he doesn't hate the class.)

[26] So Ms. Garcia joins Dutro (2011), Coles (1989), Kazemek (1985), Greene (1991), and Remnick (2014) in touting the importance of teachers telling their own stories—with the significant addition that some of the potential benefits may come from modeling a variety of emotional intensities. The students' final performances ran the gamut of emotions; I wonder if stories like Janet's led to their realizing that not every story has to be painful or sad.

Now they would be working intimately with each other for ten weeks. How much would that work affect their relationships with each other, if at all?

The first thing we do once we've gathered around a table at the back of the room (the radiator hissing behind us) is discuss The Story Shop Bill of Rights[27]. I pass copies of it out, saying, "This marks a transition in the workshop. You guys are now working on your own stuff. I want to make sure you know what your rights are as we move on." The Bill of Rights is a one-page document that includes workshop participants' rights to (1) choose what they want to participate in[28], (2) have control over their privacy and their own story[29], (3) understand what is involved in a Story Shop workshop[30], and (4) have their choices respected[31]. The Bill of Rights also includes workshop participants' responsibilities to (1) try everything once[32], (2) respect others' privacy, (3) be supportive and nonjudgmental, and (4) have a parent/guardian sign a release for the recording of their performances (which they had already done for me). I explain

[27] For many years, The Story Shop conducted workshops without any formal contract or Bill of Rights. But over the last few years, the leadership and the instructors have realized that the formal delineation and discussion of the workshop participants' rights and responsibilities was necessary to the safety of the storytelling process. In her work on personal journaling, Leona M. English (2001) discusses "the intersection of the personal and the professional" (p. 29) that takes place when students are asked to share about their lives while at school. "The dilemma this issue poses is whether the practice of crossing boundaries between the intersections has integrity" (p. 29). She cautions against demanding student reflection or disclosure, especially without the proper support services in place (p. 30), and she argues that class assignments that require self-disclosure (specifically journaling, but I believe these principles apply to storytelling units as well) should be built around the following five principles: (1) respect ("this principle puts the learner's best interests first and makes confidentiality and boundary setting essential characteristics"), (2) justice ("this principle ensures that there is equity in service to learners"), (3) beneficence ("this principle means that the learners' opportunities for positive outcomes are maximized"), (4) self-awareness ("this principle, perhaps the most challenging, is one of mutuality. It requests educators, provided they are willing and ready, to do what they have asked their students to do"), and (5) caring ("this principle requires educators to think seriously about whether they really care about the students with whom they work") (p. 32-33). The Bill of Rights is The Story Shop's attempt to hold itself accountable for upholding these kinds of principles in its work with students.

[28] This includes the participants' right to choose whether and to what extent they will participate in the workshop.

[29] This includes the participants' right to decide whether or not to share any personal information.

[30] This includes the participants' right to ask questions at any point in the workshop.

[31] This includes the participants' right to tell their stories their own way.

[32] I think responsibility #1 clashes with right #1 (the right to choose what to participate in) and is therefore trumped by it (rights are stronger than responsibilities).

each bullet point, giving them chances to ask questions. They don't have any. I ask each of them to sign his/her copy, indicating that they understand and agree. They all do, and I collect them[33].

The first activity we do together as a group is a story generator prompt sheet, which asks six questions like, "Think of a time when you did something you couldn't believe you did," "Think of a time when you clashed with an authority figure," "Think of a time you were surprised in a good way," etc. We're mining for memories. I ask them to pick two of the six prompts, jot some notes down, and be ready to share with the group. When it's Tanissa's turn to share, she tells us that she used to let her classmates cheat off of her in eighth grade, but that she stopped one day when a big project was due, which made some of them very angry.

"That was mature," Alex says.

Tajah says, "I would beat you up. That's grimy."

Tanissa flinches a bit.

As a group, we talk through Tajah's comment, eventually deciding that she would never have asked Tanissa to do her project in the first place, making her comment irrelevant. But even after we move on, I can still feel her words floating around us. Later, in my notebook, I wonder whether the wall between these two pairs will ever come down and, if so, how much of its deconstruction could be led by Alex, whose first words to Tanissa were encouraging ones.[34]

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[33] I'm not sure I spent enough time on this. These are pretty complicated ideas, and though the students had no questions and claimed to understand and agree, what real evidence do I have that our minutes-long conversation really made these rights and responsibilities clear? This should have been a much longer, more in-depth conversation.

[34] It was nice to hear Alex's supportive response to Tanissa's story, but Tajah's comment was an important reminder that there's always the possibility that a storytelling unit can further or even create divisions between our students (Lensmire, 1994). What incentive will Tanissa have to continue sharing with us if she is going to be threatened and called names for it? In my attempt to keep Tajah engaged (fueled by my preconceived notion of her as a potential discipline issue—please see footnote [102] of Tajah's strand) while still addressing her comment, I did not respond as strongly as I should have. The safe space aspect of a storytelling unit must be fiercely enforced and protected.

The next week, I open small group time by asking if they have any striking images to share from the last seven days.

Alex says something happened on Saturday that "caught his eye," but he doesn't think he can share it.

"Was it a party?" I ask.

Tajah laughs and says, "Yeah. A party of two."

Alex says, "Naw. I can't even say that. My friend that's a girl. But we talk. But we don't go out yet. Y'got that?"

Tajah interrupts: "Came to the crib. That's it."

"I got it," I say. "I think we know all we need to know," and the four of us share a good laugh. It's a tiny moment, but it feels like a promising one.[35]

We continue to share from the story generator worksheet we started the week before. When it's Dina's turn, she shares about a time she clashed with an authority figure: her mom. She tells us that she sometimes suffers from acne breakouts, and one time her mom said to her, "I don't like the way your face looks."

"Awwww, that's grimy," Tajah says.

We all agree.

Dina continues: "Even when my face doesn't look messed up, she says, 'What's wrong with your face?'"

"Y'face ain't messed up," Tajah says.

"She thinks the acne scars are messed up."

[35] I say promising because it feels like a small step toward the development of the kinds of social bonds that Eakin (2008), Pennebaker (1990), Dotinga (2012), and Johnson & Freedman (2001) say sharing personal stories can create and strengthen between people. It's easy to underestimate the power of laughter, and in this ostensibly simple moment, not only were the four of us all laughing together for the first time, but our laughter was caused by each of us being able to read between the lines of what Tajah and Alex were saying, making it more complex than it seems.

"That's crazy," Tajah says, as if her pronouncement should be the final word on the matter.

Tanissa says, "There was somethin' goin' on with her personal life that affected that. She was lashing out."

"Don't even tell me that," Tajah retorts. "That was grimy."[36]

When it's Alex's turn to share, he tells us about a time that he lost his temper at school and ran his fist through the safety glass window of a classroom door. He shows us the scar on his hand. "You seen the tissue, and you seen some of my bone."

When he tells us that he didn't get in trouble, and I express surprise at that, Dina says, "I think he did enough to himself." She and Alex share a quick smile.

When we get around to Tajah, I see that she hasn't filled anything out. I ask her if anyone has ever surprised her.

"Naw, I'm chillin'," she defers.

"Tajah has a lot of stories," Tanissa says, smiling.

On the train ride home, I write about these interactions that occurred across what seems to be established pair lines (Tanissa/Dina and Alex/Tajah): "It feels like their stories are bringing these four together."[37]

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[36] It warmed my heart to witness Tajah being so supportive of Dina, someone to whom she didn't normally ever talk as far as I could tell (which was verified by multiple sources later). Shuman (2005) argues that sharing stories can make one feel less alone in her experiences. There's a possibility that Tajah responding the way she did (incredulous that Dina's mother would treat her in such a way) made Dina feel more supported. I don't know if it did or not, but it is certainly a possibility, and I believe that giving our students chances to support each other is always a worthwhile thing to do. (As a side note, I find it interesting that Tajah uses the same word to support Dina here ("grimy") that she used to criticize Tanissa on our first day (see pg. 71) and that she will eventually use to criticize Dina as well (see pg. 77).)

[37] Storytelling has the potential to break down barriers between people (Johnson & Freedman, 2001), so putting students who don't usually interact in the same small group during a storytelling unit can lead to their feeling closer to one another. Of course, our small groups were determined by randomizer, making my students working together a matter of chance. And feeling closer is by no means guaranteed to happen during a storytelling unit (they could just

The next week, Dina volunteers to share a story in front of the whole class. It's our first student story. Before gathering the class together to hear it, I tell my small group, "Our very own Dina is going to share a story today!" As I'm walking toward the front of the class, I see Alex high-five Dina from the corner of my eye. It's such a sweet moment.[38]

Later on that day, Tajah tells our small group a story about losing a friend her eighth grade year. This friend was an even closer friend of Alex's, and while she's telling the story, Alex puts his head down and starts crying.[39] Without any prompting from me, Tanissa gets up and goes to Ms. Garcia's desk to grab the tissue box. She brings it back to the table, and I take a few tissues out and hand them to Alex, who uses them to wipe his eyes and blow his nose. It's a beautiful moment of a small group taking care of each other. No one is making Alex feel weird or embarrassed for getting emotional; we just quietly wait for him to lift his head and tell us he's okay.[40]

When the students are gone and Linda, Janet, and I are packing our things, I tell Ms. Garcia about Tanissa's getting the tissues for Alex. I tell her that I had been nervous at first about

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as easily leave it feeling more divided (Lensmire, 1994)), but I believe that the possibility that storytelling could erode barriers between students makes it a worthwhile thing to do in the classroom.

[38] I don't know whether Alex did this because I said something or if he would have high-fived Dina either way once he saw she was going to share a story, but I do suspect that high-fiving is not something Alex and Dina did very often (if at all) before Story Shop came into the classroom (see Alex's comments on pg. 82), so I wonder if this small moment of encouragement was an example of how hearing their classmates' stories can lead to students caring more about each other (Johnson & Freedman, 2001; Read & Read, 1998).

[39] For more details about this incident, please see pgs. 123-124 of Alex's strand.

[40] This incident is both an example of the potential positives a storytelling unit can offer and the potential negatives. I think it's fair to say that teachers have no interest in causing their students pain. Alex's tears indicate that the story Tajah was telling was painful for him—a clear negative. But Tanissa's getting him tissues and our group's quiet respectfulness are examples of how, as Johnson & Freedman (2001) and Read & Read (1998) argue, hearing each other's stories can lead to our students caring more about each other. And this caring can allow them to better navigate future interactions with each other (Greene, 1991; Paul 2012; Amy, 2006). Perhaps Tajah will be more sensitive to bringing up this boy in front of Alex in the future. I have no way of knowing whether she will or not, of course, but that possibility is one example of how this incident could shape future interactions between these four students.

a potential Tanissa/Dina vs. Tajah/Alex divide in my group, but that I feel the wall between them might be getting more porous.

"Tajah is very judgmental against Dina," Ms. Garcia says. "She's like, 'Nerd.' And Dina is like, 'Loser,'" thereby confirming my suspicion that the two didn't used to get along.

The next week, Tajah is suspended, so our small group only has three members. Despite Alex's not having Tajah there for support, he chooses to share a heavy story with us about losing his cousin to violence.[41]

Tanissa volunteers to be the second student to share a story with the whole group, and we gather together as a class to listen to it. Afterward, we break back into small groups, and I overhear Alex saying, "Great job!" to Tanissa as I'm walking up.

"I'm just sayin'," I add. "My group is on point. Not that we're competing—"

Tanissa interrupts: "—but we're competing," and we all laugh.

On the train ride home, I write in my notebook, "I loved walking up to Alex complimenting Tanissa of his own accord. We got to share a moment of small group pride, which felt great."[42]

The next week, Tajah is back, and the four of them chat while I take care of some housekeeping with Ms. Garcia. My audio recorder catches Dina saying she prefers the cold

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[41] Gergen & Gergen (2007) and Brown (2010) argue that self-disclosing to someone can make you feel closer to him/her. I wonder if the self-disclosure that has taken place so far in my small group has created a space wherein Alex feels comfortable sharing a personal story even when Tajah—the person he's much closer to—is not there. I have no way of knowing whether Alex would have felt comfortable sharing this story with Tanissa and Dina before The Story Shop came in or not, but there's a possibility that his apparent comfort is a result of having had a chance to get to know them a little better over the last several weeks. (For more on this story, see pgs. 134-135 of Alex's strand.)

[42] Stories form and shape relationships (Shuman, 1986), so the connection (or lack thereof) between Alex and Tanissa has been shaped in some way by their sharing of stories so far this unit. This small, supportive moment I witnessed might be evidence that that shaping has been positive. It might not have been *exclusively* positive, of course, but there does seem to be a progressive shift from how Alex originally perceived Tanissa (see his comments on pg. 82) to this moment here.

because she doesn't like to sweat—and putting deodorant on in front of people embarrasses her.

Tanissa says, "Everyone wears deodorant."

Dina says yeah, but putting is on in public is weird; people might think she's dirty.

Alex says, "Of course, *we* wouldn't think that, because we talk to you."

I come back and get to work, unaware that this conversation had taken place, but listening to it at home later on that day makes me smile. I write in my fieldnotes, "The wall I originally felt between Alex/Tajah and Tanissa/Dina might be breaking down."

The next week, I purposefully start my recorder and leave it on our small group's table before class begins. Once again, I catch some banter. Tajah is giving Alex a hard time about the hat and glasses he's wearing.

"Naw, my shit is wavy," he says.

"You look like a dickhead," Tajah says harshly.

"That's not true." Dina interjects. Then, trying to be helpful, she suggests that maybe he *could* wear a shirt that matches his hat better.

When I hear this exchange later on that day, I write in my fieldnotes, "Perhaps it's a positive sign that Dina came to Alex's aid despite Tajah's ability to intimidate." [43]

When I return, we start running ideas for stories. Dina tells us a story about her middle school best friend. She starts off by saying that she and this girl, Cyndi, originally connected over both being considered 'weird.'

"You're still weird to this day," Tajah interrupts playfully. "I don't know about crazy. You're a follow-your-own-type girl."

We all chuckle.

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[43] This is the first time I have heard Dina (who can be quite shy) contradict Tajah (who can be quite formidable) in any way. I have no way of knowing whether Dina would have defended Alex in this exchange before Story Shop came in, but I wonder if the work they've been doing together played into the bravery most certainly at play here.

"I'm sorry, I'm cuttin' you off. My bad," Tajah says.

"She's just really into it," I say to Dina.

But then Dina's story shifts into her abandoning Cyndi, who was being viciously bullied, out of fear that she would be bullied herself.

"That's grimy," Tajah interrupts again—still playfully but definitely less so. "I ain't never goin' nowhere witchu by myself."

I say that that is kind of the point—Dina's telling a story about a decision she regrets. I also compliment Dina on riling Tajah up: "When you have a bad story, nobody cares. When you have a good story, people care."

"Yeah, but that's grimy," Tajah insists. "She dipped."

Alex jumps to Dina's defense: "She ain't dip. I mean, she couldn't defend herself. Look how tiny she is. I'm sayin', you gotta understand the type of person she is. She's not a conflict person, so I understand where she comin' from. I'm the type of person that's gonna fight you. She's not that type of person, you gotta understand. You're just stubborn."[44]

Tajah sucks her teeth and crosses her arms in protest.

"I understood how she felt," Alex continues. "I don't like people getting bullied."

Dina finishes her story, ending with an articulation of her regret for abandoning Cyndi, whose final words to her were a command to never speak to her again.

"You need to find her," Tanissa says. "Closure."

Alex agrees, suggesting Facebook.

[44] I love that when I wasn't doing a good enough job at protecting my small group's safe space (I should have been much more firm with Tajah when she—once again—attacked a storyteller by calling her actions "grimy"), Alex did my job for me. The fact that he and Tajah were so much closer than he and Dina were makes this moment of his defending a relatively new friend against a much more established one all the more powerful.

Tanissa says the school should have a yearbook. "This is something they make movies about."

Later, on the train, I think about how Tanissa, Alex, and Tajah reacted to Dina's story. I find it adorable that Tanissa and Alex's first reactions were to offer advice on reconciling. And I love that, as Dina did for him at the beginning of class, Alex came to Dina's defense against Tajah's ribbing. It was a beautiful moment that revealed a nascent connection between two students who almost never interacted with each other before. But while all of Tajah's ribbing today seemed playful in nature—she didn't seem to be *trying* to be mean—I can't tell if Dina knew that. I like that Tajah was engaged, but her interruptions weren't helpful (which she recognized…before doing it again).[45]

The next week, Tanissa tells our small group a story that ends with her cheering up her mother by singing one of her mom's favorite songs. Tanissa demonstrates by singing a few bars, and Alex joins her. The moment makes us all smile.

Alex shares next, telling us about a time when he was nominated to give a speech at his eighth grade graduation. Afterward, I ask for reactions and feedback.

Dina says she likes that he shared how nervous he was to speak in front of a crowd.

When I ask Tajah what she noticed or liked, she says, "I wasn't even listening,"

"At all??" I ask, revealing more annoyance than I mean to.

"No."

Alex shrugs.

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[45] There's always a possibility that a student's story will not be taken well and/or not valued by his/her classmates (Peterson & Langellier, 2007). I worry that Tajah's reaction to Dina's story was an example of one of those times. Whether Tajah was joking or not does not matter nearly as much as how Dina took it. The consequences of interactions like this one could be serious, and the very real possibility that storytelling units can cause them is something that needs to be taken into account when considering their implementation.

Dina picks up the slack by adding that she likes the end, when he said he changed some teachers' minds about him.

On the train ride home, I can't shake the feeling that Tajah's flippancy hurt Alex's feelings, despite the fact that he didn't seem to be bothered by it nearly as much as I was.[46]

The next week, Tajah shares a story with our small group about her sister's struggle to have a baby and how she's finally in her first successful, late-term pregnancy. Afterward, as usual, I ask the other three students for feedback and comments.

Tanissa says the story was a little short. Perhaps she can add to it by talking more about what kind of person her sister was.

Alex liked the story the way it was.[47]

Dina was "going to say what Tanissa said."

Annoyed by what I perceive to be lazy feedback, I push them to give more specific feedback. How, for example, could Tajah begin her story?

Alex says she should start by describing what kind of person her sister is. "That would make more sense. That would make more sense why she feels that way."

Tanissa wonders if something will happen between now and the performances. Tajah's sister is due in four weeks, and our show is in three weeks. We all agree that ending the story with an update sounds great. We all hope it's a good one. I'm relieved that we were able to come together for Tajah. Everyone caring about how Tajah should structure her story hopefully made her feel more supported than if we had just stuck with 'liking it the way it was.'

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[46] This is another reminder that the interaction between teller and audience is not always positive (Tonkin, 1992). It also reinforces how powerful Tajah's presence can be. Whether she rattled Alex or not, she certainly rattled me. Not every opportunity we give our students to support each other is going to be taken.

[47] Alex very well may have liked Tajah's story the way it was, but I couldn't help but wonder if his comment was just a way to opt out of giving Tajah any kind of meaningful feedback. Perhaps he was feeling spiteful after Tajah was so dismissive of his story last week. I don't know.

Dina runs her Cyndi story next. For whatever reason, she seems much more nervous this time around. She uses some slang words (like 'ratchet' and 'beef') that don't seem natural to her. They fall awkwardly out of her mouth, leading to side comments from Tajah ("Did she just say, 'They were ratchet?'") and Alex ("'Beef?' Yo, Dina's a thug."). It didn't seem as if either of them was trying to be *mean*—they just seemed thrown off (as I was) by her uncharacteristic language choices and were playfully joking about it. But joking can be hurtful, especially when a student is already feeling uncomfortable. Though Alex initially defended Dina when she first told this story, he now seems to be poking fun.[48]

"Wait," Alex says when Dina is finished. "I have a question. When you got bullied, was it by one person or by a group of people?"

"There were the ringleaders and their followers," Dina answers.

"That's how it is," Tanissa confirms.

"I ain't know that," Alex says. "I thought it was like one person."

"Because you've never gotten bullied, have you?" Tanissa asks pointedly.

"I can't get bullied," Alex says, lifting one side of his mouth into a confident smile. "I intimidate people."

"He lyin' to you," Tajah says. "Don't lie to them like that."

We all laugh.

The next week is our last rehearsal before the performances. Tajah runs her story again; this time it's longer and includes more details about her sister, her mother, and herself.

"That was so much better!" I say when she's done.

"Because it had a lot more of her and her personal connection to it," Tanissa says.

[48] As Shuman (2007) and Brooks (2011) warn, sometimes the empathy provoked by a story is just an ephemeral emotional response with little or no abiding concern beneath it. It's tempting to think that any empathic displays our students might make will be evidence of deep, sustained levels of compassion, but this is not necessarily the case.

Alex compliments her last line ("And that's my sister"), encouraging her to keep it.

Dina suggests she starts with her mom.

"Yeah," Alex agrees. "It'll all tie back together."

Tajah pulls out her phone and passes around a picture of her and her sister. We all comment on how close and happy they look.

Tajah smiles.

* * *

When I sat down with Tajah and Alex for our focus group interview, I asked them about their relationship with Dina and Tanissa before we came in.

"I didn't really talk to Dina," Alex said.

"She's weird to me," Tajah interjected.[49]

"I talked to Tanissa a little bit," Alex continued. "But the storytelling thing helped us be better friends."

I asked for more specifics.

Tajah said, "Because of our stories, we all kinda connected. I wouldn't say 'sympathy,' because some people's stories was crazy, but because in some type of way, each and every one of us could connect. Like, with Alex's story, about how when his mother told him that she was proud of him, and he teared a little bit. I could connect to that, because when I do somethin' good, and my mother tell me she's proud of me, I get emotional too. So it was like, we each connected in some type of way in our stories. We each know how it felt when you was in a certain situation."

I asked if that understanding had affected their relationships outside of our visits.

[49] Another example (like their conversation about Ms. Garcia on pg. 67) of Alex speaking of someone in the past tense and Tajah speaking of her in the present. It seems as if this storytelling unit caused more shifts in Alex's opinions of others than it did in Tajah's. I wonder why that is and how much (if any) of it was controllable.

"Yeah," Tajah said. "Like, with Dina's story, it let me know that I should never go nowhere wit her, 'cause she's gonna leave me hangin'. And with Tanissa's story—my mother and my father used to argue a lot…I could connect to her story, and I know how she felt, so it was like bein' that we had that connection, 'cause her parents been through somethin' that my parents been through."

Tajah added that it didn't affect her relationship with Alex at all, because they were already close, and she already knew everything he shared.

Alex agreed: "I know other things made us closer, but I don't think necessarily that [the storytelling unit] made us closer."

When I asked Alex to explain how the storytelling unit helped him become better friends with Dina and Tanissa, he said, "When I first came to this school, and I seen Dina, I was like, 'Yo, somethin's wrong with that girl. I can't bangs with her.'[50] I'm weird, but she does extra. So I'm like, 'Nah, I can't do that.' And then when Tanissa first came, like, she's pretty, but she's smart, so she comes off as a know-it-all type snotty person."

"Yeah, like a therapist or somethin'. Always know the answer to everything," Tajah interjected.

Alex continued: "So I'm like, 'I can't bangs wit you neither. I mean, you pretty, but you do too much.' But as we went on, I started noticin' that me and Dina, we gave each other nicknames and stuff like that, and me and Tanissa could actually have a normal conversation—not only about classwork. Like, we were friends. And me and Dina, we can actually hang around each other and laugh and joke with each other."[51]

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[50] i.e., hang out with her

[51] This conversation with Tajah and Alex taught me a lot about storytelling and classroom relationships. Storytelling units can bring students closer together, but they can also divide. Storytelling units can build empathy, but they can

I asked Alex and Tajah if their opinion of anyone in the class changed when they heard him/her tell a story.

"Yeah," Tajah said. "It was bad and good reaction. Like with Dina, it was bad, because even though you small, you shouldn't leave your friend hangin' like that. But it was also good, because at the end of the day, she realized what she did was wrong…At least she could confess to the fact that she knows she was wrong, and she should have did somethin' different."

"Yeah, that's what I was about to say," Alex said.

When I sat down with Dina and Tanissa for a focus group interview, I also asked them about their relationship with Alex and Tajah, both before and after the storytelling unit.

Tanissa said, "I talked to Alex, 'cause I have him in certain classes. But not really Tajah, for me."

Dina said, "I'm a senior, so I don't have any classes other than this one with them, so whenever Tajah came in, I was like, 'Whoa, Tajah's here.'[52]…I didn't really talk to her. But her story was, I feel like it touched me. I almost cried during her story, when she was running it through the first time."

So all four of my small group students and Ms. Garcia confirmed that the two pairs in my small group didn't have much to do with each other before we arrived. I asked Dina and Tanissa if Alex and Tajah's stories affected their opinions of them at all.

Dina said, "Alex's story, I kind of saw him that way. I was like, 'Yup, class clown. I saw that.'…And then Tajah was talking about her family, and I'm like, 'You chose a family story;

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also erode it, if a storyteller reveals something another student finds unlikable. Storytelling units can reveal connections students never knew existed, but they don't always bring students any closer.

[52] From the tone of Dina's statement here, it seemed that not only did she already know who Tajah was before she walked into the class, but she also knew that Tajah was a force. For me, that makes the moment when Dina stands up to her in protection of Alex (see pg. 76) all the more powerful.

that's really surprising.' 'Cause usually the quieter people choose, like, school stories and stories that don't really hurt them in a way. And I was like, 'Wow. It's a deep story.'"[53]

Tanissa said, "People in general, we like to say, 'Don't judge a book by its cover,' but I can admit to the fact that even I do it, and I like to think that everyone does it on a certain level. You naturally find yourself trying to pigeonhole people. You try to categorize them and judge them, even if in the smallest ways. So I think it's always gonna be a surprise when you're with a stranger and you don't know them, and even if you don't make certain judgments about them—you just see them as kind of this blank slate, and you're like, 'I don't know them'—but then hearing a story about them brings you closer to them and kind of shapes your view of them. Even if not in a good or a bad way, you just know them better, and that's important in and of itself."[54]

When I ask them which stories were their favorites, Tanissa says, "I like Tajah's. I do. It's personal, and when you hear about a woman having a lot of miscarriages or trying to have a baby and not being able, I mean, it would affect anyone. You hear about it, but for people like me—I've never known anyone who went through that. It's gonna affect you, because even if I'm not close to Tajah, I felt like I was closer to *that*—I was closer to the essence of women having miscarriages and that sadness. I felt connected to that sadness through Tajah and through her story. It made me closer to her, even if she doesn't feel the same way."[55]

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[53] Storytelling can reinforce students' previous assumptions about each other (as it seems to have done with Dina's assumptions about Alex), but it can also allow our students to expose new sides of themselves we hadn't seen before. Those new sides can be ones we didn't want to see (Lensmire, 1994), but they can also be ones that pleasantly surprise us.

[54] Tanissa's honesty and introspection here really impressed me. Storytelling units can offer counternarratives to the stories our students think they already know about each other (Adichie, 2009; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), and they have the ability to bring relative strangers closer together, which can be both a good and a bad thing. But either way, storytelling units shape our students' views of each other, which—as Tanissa wisely points out—has intrinsic value of its own.

[55] Stories can create empathy and a real sense of connection between our students. I love that Tanissa points out here that she can feel closer to Tajah whether those feelings are reciprocated or not. I think she's absolutely right.

During my interview with Ms. Garcia, I asked if she could speak to the four students who ended up in my small group. She said that, being writers, Dina and Tanissa were in their element with this unit.

"Dina is a little different. She definitely has a different take on the world and sometimes can be shunned from the other students as 'not cool,' so sometimes students think, 'Oh, she's weird' and don't wanna hang around her. But it was great because she really shined in our class, and students would be like, 'Oh, wow! Snaps for Dina!' and I just saw a little more confidence in the way she held herself[56], and I think at first, Tajah and Alex—especially Tajah—she really didn't like Dina, because they're completely opposite…And Tajah's very judgmental and rude at first, and I think the fact that they had to work together in a group helped, and the fact that Dina is skilled at what she does, it was kind of like, 'Oh.' I don't know, I noticed at least Tajah would just be more polite. Whether or not she changed her mind about her, she was definitely more polite."[57]

The classroom community pre- and post-survey results (see Appendix 3) from the four students in my small group align with what the focus group interviews, teacher interview, and participant observation data showed. All four students felt a stronger connection with their classmates overall, but there were some dips in spirit, trust, and interaction.

Dina's post-survey showed an overall growth of 11% in her feeling of classroom community over the sixteen-week unit, including a 20% growth in spirit (how she felt about herself), a 3% growth in trust (how safe she felt in the classroom), a 13% growth in interaction

[56] Rosen & Rosen (1988) argue that storytelling units can offer students opportunities to become leaders, allowing the ones who might not normally 'shine' to do so, potentially causing increased self-esteem and confidence. Ms. Garcia seems to think that Dina is an example of one such student, and I would agree.

[57] Storytelling units can 'force' students who wouldn't normally work together to get to know each other, which can potentially lead to their respecting each other more (King, 2011; Paul, 2012). Ms. Garcia seems to think that Tajah and Dina being in the same small group led to positive shifts in the way Tajah treated Dina, which is probably true, though some of the things Tajah said to Dina during class (and about her in the focus group) were less than 'polite.'

(how positively she felt her interactions with others in the classroom were), and a 10% growth in learning (how valuable she felt her learning in the class was). Dina strongly agreed with the statement, "I feel alone in this class" before the workshop; she strongly disagreed with it afterward.[58]

Tajah's post-survey showed an overall growth of 12% in her feeling of classroom community, including a 10% growth in spirit, a 15% growth in trust, a 10% growth in interaction, and a 12% growth in learning. Tajah disagreed with the statement, "I feel that others in this class are interested in how I'm doing" before the workshop; she agreed with it afterward. She agreed with the statement, "I feel uncomfortable admitting that I don't know something in this class" before the workshop; she disagreed with it afterward. And she agreed with the statement, "I don't care about everything that we learn in this class" before the workshop; she disagreed with it afterward.[59]

Alex was absent the day the pre-survey was given, but his post-survey had an overall classroom community 'score' of 73% (the class average for the post-survey), including a 78% in

[58] The fact that Dina's biggest gains were in her feelings about herself aligns well with the increased confidence that Ms. Garcia and I saw in her over the course of the unit. The fact that her smallest gains were in her feelings of trust makes sense when I consider the times she was picked on during/after telling a story, which serves as yet another reminder for me of how important it is to fiercely guard the safe space in the classroom during a storytelling unit. It was nice to see that she felt less alone after the unit, though. While I can't know if this shift was due solely to the storytelling unit, it's possible that it had a lot to do with it, which would have made it worthwhile.

[59] Tajah's gains were pretty consistent across all four aspects of the survey, which aligns well with what she told me in our focus group interview and what she wrote on Ms. Garcia's reflection sheet after we left (which Ms. Garcia sent me a picture of). In response to "What did you gain from your experience in storytelling?" Tajah wrote, "I gained trust. I say trust because I don't really trust nobody with nothing but I learned that I can trust teachers and my second period class." In response to "Which storytelling activity did you enjoy the most?" Tajah wrote, "I enjoyed The Story Shop alot because it gave me courage." In response to "If you could take this class over again, what do you wish we had worked on?" Tajah wrote, "Nothing, I think the project we worked on was great because it pulled all of us closer together. And we are very comfortable with each other." These answers represent a pretty radical shift from going to the principal and asking to be transferred out of the class! Clearly this storytelling unit was responsible for most if not all of that shift, which is a strong argument for doing this kind of work.

spirit (3% higher than average), a 60% in trust (4% lower than average), a 70% in interaction (8% lower than average), and an 85% in learning (9% higher than average).[60]

Tanissa's post-survey showed an overall growth of 4% in her feeling of classroom community, but that included a small drop of 2% in both spirit and trust, no gains in interaction, and a 22% growth in learning. Tanissa agreed with the statement, "I do not feel in control of my own learning" before the workshop; she disagreed with it afterward.[61]

Storytelling and Whole Class Relationships

On our seventh visit, Ms. Garcia, my fellow storytelling instructors, and I decide that it's time to let the students start telling the model stories at the beginning of class if they want to. They've now seen five different stories from us (two from me, one from Ms. Garcia, and one from each co-instructor), and a few students have told us that they'd like to share in front of the class. It feels safe enough to let them, so we offer it as an option.[62]

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[60] I am very disappointed in myself for not having Alex take the pre-survey the first day I saw him. Even having him take it one week after everyone else would have been better than not having him take it at all. Having only his post-survey means I can't use it to compare his perceptions before the unit to those after it. Comparing him to the class average doesn't tell me much. (What if his pre-survey numbers would have been much lower? Then the value-add would speak more loudly than the fact that he was technically 'below average.') Still, it concerns me that the external aspects of classroom community (trust and interaction) were so much lower for him than the internal ones (spirit and learning). I wonder why that is.

[61] Tanissa's survey results are a bit less clear. Her dips were extremely small ones, so perhaps rather than indicating any real negative shifts, her post-survey results simply indicate that—with the exception of her feelings about the value of the class itself, which clearly improved—this storytelling unit didn't really change Tanissa's perceptions of her classroom community much at all. That would make sense considering that, according to Ms. Garcia, Tanissa was already a strong student and a confident presence in her class before we came in. (Also, storytelling units don't always have a big effect on a student one way or the other.) Still, it's nice to see that Tanissa feels more in control of her learning now for whatever reason (it certainly doesn't have to be because of the storytelling unit).

[62] This decision may have been premature. The risk of having students run their stories before they're ready is high. They could share something that they haven't thoroughly processed yet, and we didn't know their stories well enough at this point to know exactly what they were going to say. It's also important to note here that even if/when a space *feels* safe, there is, of course, no such thing as absolute safety in a classroom; what's safe and for whom is always context-laden and in a constant state of flux. Perhaps a better thing for us to have done—because we did want to shift from teacher stories to student stories—was to show some of the many videos The Story Shop has of students (including some from this school) telling their stories in final performances. There's something to be said

When Dina volunteers to go first, I am pleasantly surprised. I know she has never performed for this class before, and I expected someone who had to volunteer first. Once everyone is gathered, I preface Dina's performance by acknowledging how brave she's being. The class poetry snaps and "woo"s for her.

After Dina's story (about standing up to her parents when they try to forbid her from seeing a boy), we head back to our small group table. On the way over, I ask Dina how it felt to tell a story in front of the whole class for the first time.

"It felt like sand was going down my throat…I was kind of nervous."

I commend her bravery once again but wonder if perhaps this wasn't such a good idea…[63]

At the end of class the day of Dina's story, I ask for someone to share a 'memorable moment,' as I always do. Alex has been the one to share the memorable moment the past few visits, and—apparently—the class has come to like and expect that. When he doesn't immediately volunteer, Miranda says, "Alex, c'mon. Send us off."

"Yeah," say multiple people.

"Don't pressure him," I say, smiling.

But Alex is happy to do it. "What I learned today was don't let other people's opinion stop you from doin' what you wanna do."

The class poetry snaps. After all of the students are gone, Ms. Garcia jokes that we should start calling the last part of class 'Alex Moments' rather than 'Memorable Moments.'[64]

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for the power of students seeing their classmates share example stories live, but the risks involved in doing that should have been considered more than they were.

[63] When I checked in with Dina the next week, she told me that she felt good about having shared, but just because she [might have] changed her mind about it doesn't make her original discomfort any less unsettling. Again, public storytelling is not always a positive experience (Tonkin, 1992), and the risks of it possibly being a negative one *must* be considered when deciding whether or not to implement a storytelling unit in the classroom.

The next week, Janet is out of town, so we have a substitute Story Shop instructor filling in for her. We also have another visitor—an administrator from Story Shop who is visiting to check on how our workshop is going. She sits in the back of the room and takes notes the entire class period. I worry that her clearly evaluative presence will throw off the comfort level we've been trying to build.[65]

Tanissa volunteers to tell a story. It's about her middle school best friend. Afterward, I ask the class for comments on what they noticed or liked. Dylan is the first to raise his hand: "She had a lot of hand gestures."

Then Nwoye says, "The noise that the window was making."

Both Dylan and Nwoye rarely speak in class. It's nice not only to see them volunteering first but doing so on a day when two strangers are in the room.

The next week, Kyra volunteers to share a story with the class. It's about the excitement of being offered her first small film role and the crushing disappointment of it falling through. At one point in the story, she's on her way home, and the film's producer calls her cell phone. She allows her heart to jump in excitement—maybe they've changed their mind and want her to come back! No. They want the earrings they had given her to wear back. Our circle of attentive audience members fills with "aww"s and "ugh"s. We know what it feels like to be kicked when we're down, and Kyra's story plucked those heartstrings perfectly.[66]

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[64] I don't know if Alex was considered much of a leader in this class before we came in, but it does seem as if this small tradition is helping to establish him as someone to be looked to for nuggets of wisdom (Rosen & Rosen, 1988), and he seems to be enjoying that quite a bit.

[65] This worry might have been unfounded, but there have definitely been times in the past when I have felt that my students were acting differently because a principal or other authority figure was in my room. Perhaps the heightened sense of importance I place on having a safe space during a storytelling unit made me extra sensitive.

[66] Berkowitz (2011) argues that the power of an audience is increased when it's made up of people the storyteller knows, and in this moment, that feels true. Perhaps Kyra's classmates groaned because knowing her (at least more than a room full of strangers would) helped them understand just how deep her disappointment ran. Like all

At the end of class, I ask Terrain to "take us out" with a memorable moment. (I want to avoid the assumption that only Alex can do that.) He says, "If you believe in yourself, you can go far."

I thank him, remarking to myself that I had originally defined 'memorable moments' as recollections from the forty-four minutes we'd had together that they didn't think would fade. But Alex had come to define 'memorable moments' as the lessons learned from the stories that were shared that day. And now, apparently, others have accepted his definition. I like it.

The next week, Terrain volunteers to share a story with the class about the time his father forbade him from traveling the country in a singing group.[67] Terrain is quite flamboyant. When I first met him, I read him as an 'out and proud' young gay man (on our first day, he told the class he loves fashion and dressing his friends). But Ms. Garcia told us that he actually identifies as straight and that he sometimes gets picked on and called 'gay boy.' At one point in Terrain's story, he talks about locking himself in a closet out of depression. Dylan and Michael make eye contact, smile, and drop their heads to keep from laughing. I keep watching them, ready to confront them if they get any more disrespectful, but they don't. On top of this, Jessica, Alethea, and Robert all come in late and at different times, interrupting Terrain's story thrice. I can't tell whether Terrain noticed Dylan and Michael or how bothered (if at all) he was by the late students' interruptions, but—to me—the room does not feel as safe as it has in previous weeks. (Weeks later, Terrain's post-survey revealed that he might have shared my feelings that day. It

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powerful things, however, having a familiar audience has a potentially negative side. Sometimes it's easier to tell a story to a room full of people who don't know you. There is less risk that you will see them again or that the things you reveal will affect relationships and/or be held against you. So, like all powerful things, the decision to have students tell stories to their classmates should be wielded carefully.

[67] I wonder if Terrain's decision to tell a story about standing up to a parent who was being unfair was influenced at all by Dina's having shared a very similar story a few weeks before. I don't know.

indicated an overall drop of 16% in his feeling of classroom community, including a 20% drop in trust and a 22% drop in interaction.)[68]

When I walk up to my small group after Terrain's performance, however, all four of them are talking about his story.

Alex says, "Man, I'd cry" (if his dad forbade him from doing something that was that important to him).

Tajah says she'd go anyway.

Tanissa and Dina agree.

After having felt so unsettled during Terrain's performance, it was heartening to hear that his story had connected with at least four of the students in the room.

Final Performances

It is our final week at the school. We decide to split the performances over two class periods in order to give students a choice in how their stories will be heard. On the first performance day, we mix up the small groups, and the eight students who don't feel comfortable telling a story to the whole class tell it to three people who haven't heard it before.[69]

On the day of the small group showcase, Dylan comes up to me before class begins. "What we doin'?"

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[68] Seeing Terrain's post-survey results was a painful reminder that our students' stories may not be taken well by their classmates (Peterson & Langellier, 2007). For his feelings of trust and interaction to drop so severely makes me feel like we did wrong by him, which I take as a personal failure. I didn't get to talk to him about this (I didn't code the surveys until after our last day, so I didn't know how much his perception had shifted until after we were gone), but I wish I had. I regret that he didn't have a more positive experience.

[69] This is the first time that one of my Story Shop workshops has had two official performance days/options. Before, students would either tell their stories in front of the whole class or they would share their 'final' version with their small groups on one of our last workshop days. Doing the performances this way allows us to formally celebrate every student's story regardless of whether (s)he feels comfortable standing up in front of the whole class or not. We could have added other options as well, such as telling the story to one new person or writing it out for just one person (possibly the classroom teacher) to read.

"Telling our stories!" I answer, knowing that he's well aware of what we're doing.

"Not me," he says coyly.

"I know. You're going tomorrow in front of the whole class, like a BEAST!"

Dylan smiles and walks away while Ms. Garcia and I laugh.

When I sat down with Ms. Garcia for our brunch interview, I asked her to share some of her reactions to her students' decisions to share or not share in front of the whole class. She thought for a second before saying, "It's always interesting. There's always someone who volunteers that you never would think would. This semester it was Dylan, totally. That was exciting and unexpected, because he was the kid who told me he hated my class. He went to the principal and told her he hated the class, that he wasn't gonna share anything, that he hated storytelling, that he wasn't gonna tell a story, and then suddenly by the end he's like, 'I wanna tell my story in front of the class.' Tajah also went. 'I don't have any stories. This class is stupid. I'm not staying. You can't make me.'"[70]

On the day of the small group showcase, I end up in a group with Tanissa, Jessica, Alethea, and Angelica. After Tanissa shares her story, about witnessing her dad's brutal attack on her mom, Alethea says, "I like throughout the entire story you can feel—not even hear—you can *feel* the close bond you have with your mom."[71]

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[70] Storytelling units can cause significant, positive behavioral shifts, and Ms. Garcia clearly thinks that Dylan is an example of that happening (see footnote [78]). His post-survey showed the most gains of anyone in the class by far, seemingly corroborating her description of his attitude change. It indicated an overall growth of 44% in his feelings of classroom community, including a 45% growth in spirit, a 55% growth in trust, a 52% growth in interaction, and a 25% growth in learning. I didn't get to talk to Dylan to get his take on this, but it definitely seems as if the Story Shop affected him in a positive way. I find the gains present in his post-survey to be particularly striking considering he was one of the two students who originally asked to be transferred out the class. (Of course, Dylan did not end up performing, which complicates all of this in a really big way—see footnote [75].)

[71] I think Alethea perfectly articulates here how storytelling can spark empathy. Storytelling is a communal act (Richter, 1996), so the storyteller is often not the only one experiencing the emotions being portrayed. Of course, as I have mentioned before, this can be both a good and a bad thing.

Jessica responds to Tanissa next: "I appreciate how open you were with us. And I just…I connected—I think we've discussed how, um…it's just that—" she says, dabbing her eye with the back of her index finger. "There was somethin' in my eye! A branch or somethin'." We all laugh. "But, yeah, just. You could feel the emotion and the tension. You're very good with your words."[72]

Jessica tells her story next. It's about hanging out with the wrong people in middle school and making decisions that hurt her family. "I remember saying to myself, 'I can't do it anymore. I can't be a person I hate.'"

Afterward, Angelica says, "I can relate, 'cause I'm the type, I have friends who aren't necessarily good people…Once you get away from friends like that, you realize how much better your life is, 'cause you get to do much more when your parents trust you."[73]

Tanissa responds to Jessica next: "I soooo can relate to feeling like your family hates you for doing things that you do, and I can relate to being afraid to walk through your house because every time someone in your house looks at you, it feels like they want to kill you."

"The stabby-stab eyes," Jessica says, and we all laugh.

The morning of our final showcase, a giant snowstorm blows through New York City. The schools stay open, but attendance is abysmal. There are only six students in class, only three

[72] The inarticulate nature of this moment made it all the more powerful for me to watch. Tanissa and Jessica seemed to share a moment of connection much stronger than the rest of us in the group could understand. Sharing stories can make you feel less alone in your experiences (Shuman, 2005) and join you with your audience (Roemer, 1995), which seems to be happening here. Plus, a good oral story can be as artful as any piece of literature (Bauman, 1986). It's sometimes the literature I connect with the most that I find the most difficulty discussing. It seems easier sometimes just to *feel* it. (I found it interesting that, when coding Jessica's post-survey later that week, I saw that it showed an overall growth of 7% in her feeling of classroom community (which was the exact average for the class), but that that included a 22% growth in interaction. I couldn't help but wonder if the timing of the post-survey—given at the end of class on the day of the small group performances—had something to do with that.)

[73] Once again, a student illustrates storytelling's ability to allow others to relate to your life—and therefore feel related to. Though I don't know whether these girls knew any of these things about each other before this day, and I can't know how much it mattered to them to hear that someone else had been through similar experiences, previous research has suggested that feeling the kinds of connections these girls are articulating can lead to students caring more about each other (Johnson & Freedman, 2001; Read & Read, 1998), which is so important.

of whom are performing (the other three performed in small groups the day before). I try not to let my disappointment show too obviously on my face. I try to justify the absences by thinking about how bad the storm had been. But the truth is that I'm crushed. After all, I made it to the school, and I live an hour and a half away. And this was our last day there! We had told them that. Didn't they remember? Why didn't they show up?[74]

During our interview, I asked Ms. Garcia whether Dylan ever ended up performing, as he was one of the many students who were supposed to perform in the showcase but didn't come to school the day of the storm. She said he did not. "But he was so gung-ho about it. And I don't think that was fake." She added that she thought he didn't come because he recently moved from Florida and doesn't have the clothes he needs, so he doesn't come to school when it's really cold outside. We both shared a 'bummer' moment about the semester being over, meaning he would never get the chance to share his story the way he said he would.[75]

* * *

When I sat down with Tajah and Alex, I asked them what their responses and reactions were throughout the unit, starting with the first day. Tajah went first: "I wasn't wit it. I didn't wanna do it. And then, at the end, I did it. 'Cause y'all encouraged me to wanna tell my story. Bein' that y'all trusted me, I could trust y'all and tell y'all my story in the class, as a class."[76]

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[74] I caught myself wondering that day if I had overestimated the investment of our students. Perhaps we had not built that strong of a connection with them after all. It wasn't really fair to question the students' commitment (the storm *was* a really bad one, and the mayor *had* told parents to 'use their discretion' regarding sending their kids to school, and attendance *was* extremely low across the entire building), but—again, because I'm so deeply attached to this work—it was hard not to when everything we'd been doing was leading up to this one day. What I should have been focusing on was how much more important the three-month process we'd just finished was than any one day of performances could ever be. The process is *always* more important than the product in this kind of work.

[75] My 'bummer' moment here was further complicated by my curiosity about whether Ms. Garcia was right and Dylan really was just avoiding the cold/snow or if he was just avoiding the performance. I can't know.

[76] I wonder what specific things we did that allowed Tajah to feel that we trusted her and that we could be trusted. She spoke of our teacher stories (see pg. 64) but I wonder if there was anything else that helped.

During my interview with Ms. Garcia, I asked her what she thought about Tajah's decision to share in front of the class. She told me that Tajah had shared before in class (during a spoken word poetry unit), so she "wasn't actually shocked that she was gonna get up and do it. I was excited to hear her story, because I felt like I didn't get that opportunity to work with her one-on-one, so I didn't know much about her personal experiences and struggles."

When I asked her what she thought when she heard it, she said, "It made a lot of sense. And it made me understand her more, as a teacher. And I feel like that's one of the things—I feel lucky that I get to teach this class. I know things about these students that other teachers don't. I understand these students in a way that other teachers don't. So sometimes I feel like I can help other teachers when they're struggling with stuff."[77]

When I asked Ms. Garcia to tell me about a student she thought struggled during the unit, she returned to Dylan: "The biggest struggle came from Dylan." She told me about how he shuts down and pretends to sleep when he's uncomfortable. About how he's changed high schools several times. About how she doesn't know if his dad is in his life at all. "He does not like talking about his personal life at all…Whether or not he wants to admit it, I did see a change. I saw him actually responding more and actually having something to say. He suddenly wanted to give his opinion and had feedback and things he liked or noticed or wanted to say."[78]

Ms. Garcia also brought up Nwoye. She said he struggles with writing and has great difficulty focusing (she thinks he has some undiagnosed learning disabilities): "I wasn't sure, having him in my group, what was gonna happen…He wrote for a good, like, solid twenty or

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[77] Ms. Garcia is right in that storytelling units can help teachers understand their students (and potentially connect with them) more, because stories form and shape relationships (Shuman, 1986). And, as Tanissa pointed out (see footnote [55]), Tajah's cooler words regarding Ms. Garcia (see footnote [21]) don't make Ms. Garcia's feeling of connection to her any less valuable. Connection does not require reciprocation.

[78] Ms. Garcia saw the same shift in Dylan that I did and that his classroom community post-survey indicated (see footnote [70]).

twenty-five minutes, writing his story down with solid focus. Just writing. I'd never seen that before. He actually stayed late in class. I had to write him a late pass. He was, like, *in* it. He was like, 'Can I please just finish this?' and because I had never gotten that kind of work out of him, I said, 'Of course!'…He just wrote that whole story out for himself. So, that was huge."[79]

In my focus group with Dina and Tanissa, I asked them what their responses and reactions were to the unit, starting with the first day. Dina said, "I'm not okay with new people coming into my classroom, so when you guys came in, I'm like, 'Whoa, why are they steppin' into my classroom right now? Who are these people?' I'm like, 'They're gonna be some mean teachers.'…And then you guys came into the small groups, and I'm like, 'Whoa, this lady's cool!'"[80]

When I asked Dina and Tanissa whether the Story Shop process changed their opinions about anybody in the class, Dina said, "I didn't see anybody in a different light. 'Cause I'm not the person to be like, 'Oh this person's evil.' I'm like, 'There's a reason why they're doing that, and I want to know why.'"

I clarified that I wasn't just asking about negative-to-positive shifts. I then asked specifically about Ms. Garcia. Tanissa said, "I kind of see Ms. Garcia as neutral, even afterwards…When the Story Shop came in, I kind of saw it as a relationship between us and the Story Shop, and she was kind of there to be a conduit. She was just there, for me. So the relationship, I think, that was significant was between us and Story Shop."

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[79] Storytelling units can motivate students who may struggle with more traditional academic work. Ms. Garcia's anecdote here supports the research that suggests bringing oral storytelling into the classroom can bring academic benefits, such as increased attendance, participation, and work ethic (Johnson & Freedman, 2001; Phelan, 1991; Read & Read, 1998; Zander, 2007; Rosen & Rosen, 1988; Kuyvenhoven, 2009). And Nwoye's post-survey results support Ms. Garcia's observation that the unit was positive for him; they showed an overall growth of 16%, including a 7% growth in spirit, a 15% growth in trust, a 23% growth in interaction, and a 13% growth in learning.

[80] It's important for Story Shop to realize that sometimes bringing new people into the classroom can be harmful to any sense of safe space that has already been built up by the classroom teacher and his/her students.

Dina agreed.

The classroom teacher versus teaching artist issue also came up in my interview with Ms. Garcia: "Sometimes the kids feel freer because they know you're gonna leave the school, and you're not connected to the school. So sometimes they feel a little more freedom to say things and do things because you're not my teacher-teacher, where you're gonna give me a grade or tell the principal or something. Sometimes I think they feel a little more freedom."[81]

In my interview with Ms. Garcia, I asked her if she felt any of her students had a negative reaction to the Story Shop process, which prompted her to discuss Angelica, who shared a particularly difficult story: "She felt confident enough to share a very intense story about being raped, and she ended up sharing that in front of the whole class. She got emotional. I had told her she did not have to share it. She said, 'No, I want to. I really want to tell this story.' So that was interesting because Tajah yelled out in the middle of it, 'Sit down! You don't have to tell this story! It's too emotional! Don't tell this!'[82] and Angelica got very—she just toughened up really quickly and said, 'I want to. I'm fine.' And she just kind of sucked it up. And I went up there and I stood next to her the whole time. I actually held her hand, just so that she could stand there and tell it, because I knew it was important to her…However, there was another student in the class, Alethea, who was very emotional about whatever—something in Angelica's story sparked a

[81] This was such an eye-opening comparison for me; I had never thought about the possibility of this process being extremely different if/when a classroom teacher attempted to do it on his/her own. This is such an important thing for teaching artists to realize—that if the teacher is not the one doing the direct work with students, it can make the students feel as if (s)he's not really involved.

[82] Would this have happened if I were in the room? I don't know, but I can't help but wonder if Tajah's disruption here had anything to do with her lack of relationship with Ms. Garcia. I consider this to be a major violation.

memory for her, so that was very difficult for her to sit and listen to. She had to leave the classroom. She was emotional."[83]

Still, Ms. Garcia insists that the net effect of this process was a good one: "Overall, I would say the majority of the class, the students really enjoyed it…They look at each other in a different way, and they have a newfound respect for each other, and I'm always grateful for that, because empathy is something that I really strongly want to have them embody—y'know, really trying to understand people before we place judgment…So it's always wonderful when they're able to get to that point of finally having enough trust and safety in the classroom to reveal something about themselves and then also just learning from each other."[84]

Ms. Garcia continued: "I don't see any real disadvantage, except like I said, other stories can strike a nerve in other students, and I've seen that. That's sometimes really hard for other students to endure…Generally, once they do, they're like, 'Wow. I always thought it was just me,' or 'It's nice to know I'm not alone,' or 'Wow, that was hard.' They never say to me, 'I don't ever wanna do that again. I hate this class.' It can just be emotional sometimes. It can be

[83] Dutro (2008) reminds us that encountering others' experiences "can bring our own rushing swiftly, viscerally, back to us" (p. 425), which seems to have happened to Alethea upon hearing Angelica's story. I see both her and Tajah's reactions as potential blows to the sense of classroom connection in Ms. Garcia's room. Ms. Garcia's point here seems to be that sometimes it can be important for students to share stories that are painful, but would Angelica say the same? In a few months, will she still be glad she told that story in such a public way? Winn and Ubiles (2011) remind us that students "may not foresee possible regrets they may have about sharing certain aspects of their lives" (p. 303). Perhaps Angelica's long-term reaction to sharing this story will depend on whether she felt truly heard (Jelin, 2002). I don't know. But I do know that her post-survey showed an overall drop of 6% in her feeling of classroom community, including an astounding 23% drop in trust, which I find deeply troubling.

[84] Ms. Garcia seems to think that, overall, this storytelling unit was a positive experience for her students. While this is important (capturing and honoring her perceptions was one of the main objectives of this work), and while I certainly agree with her, I also want to point out that some students seem to have had negative experiences at certain points in this workshop, and storytelling units should not be utilitarian endeavors. It is important not to let the lessons to be learned from those students' negative experiences be drowned out by the encouragements to be taken from other students' positive experiences.

difficult emotionally. But I haven't seen anything where they shut down and can't work anymore or don't talk to anyone. I don't ever see any kind of real strong—I haven't seen that, no."[85]

At one point in our interview, Ms. Garcia said, "And I find that it [storytelling] just helps everything in class. I don't have disciplinary issues, for the most part. Once that trust is built, once they do start kind of showing themselves to each other, I really don't have disciplinary issues. And if they are, they're minor, and they're just teenagers kind of stuff, it's not the big things that happen in other classes."[86]

When I asked Ms. Garcia if she noticed any changes in attendance, she said, "Students who had attendance issues were students who were not coming at all…I feel like once they actually start going through the process, if they're there for it, I do find that there's less attendance issues. And I find that they do their work. And then they're mad at me if they don't all get to share…I think those who were there and are able to actually go through the process, they are more excited and willing to be there."[87]

When I asked Ms. Garcia to speak about a student whose behavior or attitude shifted during this unit, she brought up Nyeia, who had always been very quiet but who had recently volunteered to share an original spoken word poem during an after-school performance. Nyeia was in both Ms. Garcia's regular small group and in her remixed small group the first

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[85] I'm glad that Ms. Garcia has never seen a student completely shut down during an oral storytelling unit; unfortunately, I have. In fact, in my pilot study, one of the students in my small group stopped coming to class on Wednesdays, I suspect in part because he thought (rightfully so, sadly) that I would pressure him to tell a difficult story about his sister's death in our final performance (for more on this, see footnote [167] in Tajah's strand). Storytelling is a powerful thing, and it's important to remember the potentially negative side of that power. Hearing and telling stories can upset our students as much as it might hearten them.

[86] This was great thing to hear. I do believe that relationships are the currency of instruction; they can be banked on to get students to work harder and behave better for you in class. Since oral storytelling units can help teachers build better relationships with their students, it's actually not surprising that Ms. Garcia saw classroom management gains.

[87] So Ms. Garcia did see traces of the attendance boost previous research has suggested storytelling units can cause (Johnson & Freedman, 2001; Phelan, 1991; Read & Read, 1998), but she adds the important distinction that students have to be coming to school fairly regularly in the first place to actually experience it.

performance day. "They were really impressed with Nyeia and the fact that she had not really spoken up before that. To me that was so exciting—to see somebody who is so intelligent, so many wonderful things about them, but doesn't verbalize them, is very cut off."[88]

Nyeia's story was about being betrayed by her middle school best friend, who started hanging out with some other students who were bullying her. She said she was so hurt that she's never really trusted anyone since. After she told her story, Ms. Garcia told me Tajah said, "You can't let that rule your life. You're so awesome. That was a long time ago. You're an amazing person. You can't let that girl have that power over you anymore. You can't live like that." Nyeia was smiling and saying, "Thank you."

"It was so funny," Ms. Garcia continued, "because Tajah was so ready to go pound the girl. 'Where she at?'"

When I asked if Tajah and Nyeia had had a relationship before, Ms. Garcia said, "I don't think they've ever talked *ever*. I think Tajah said she'd never heard Nyeia talk before, and Nyeia definitely has not spoken to Tajah."[89] She then added that Dina and Nyeia were really good friends, but Dina (also in her small group on performance day) had never heard that story before either.[90]

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[88] Ms. Garcia clearly believes that Nyeia's experience was a positive one, which Nyeia's post-survey supports (it showed an overall growth of 13% in her sense of classroom community, including a significant 20% growth in trust). Still, I can't help but wonder whether students being shy or not verbalizing their feelings is intrinsically a 'bad' thing that needs to be changed. Sure, storytelling units can open shyer students up, but who's to say that their shy/reserved natures weren't fine to begin with? This is something to consider when deciding final 'performance' options (for more on this, see pgs. 182-183 in Chapter 6).

[89] What a great example of how storytelling units can connect students who might never have connected otherwise. Like I wondered with Jessica (see footnote [72]), I wonder if the fact that Nyeia took her post-survey the day of this encouraging exchange with Tajah affected the way she answered the questions about trust.

[90] I see this as a kind of counterpoint to Alex and Tajah saying this storytelling unit didn't teach them anything new about each other (see pg. 82). According to both Ms. Garcia and Dina, Dina and Nyeia were close before but Nyeia's story was brand new to Dina. So storytelling units can lead our students to reveal new information to classmates they already knew well, not just to the ones they didn't. This isn't automatically a good thing, to be clear (I'm sure Nyeia had her reasons for not having told Dina that story already), but it certainly has the potential to be.

When I asked Dina about her reaction to any specific stories, she said, "When Nyeia told her story. I know Nyeia, and I know she's very shy, and I've been with her for four years now, and I was like, 'I think she's gonna explain to us why she's shy,' and then she did, and I was like, 'This is really…she was the Cyndi from my story. She played the Cyndi, and I was like her friend that disowned her. Throughout her story, I was like, 'I'm a bad person, I'm a bad person.' I felt so horrible. I felt so bad for the rest of the day."[91]

When I asked Dina whether she had a favorite classmate story, she said it was a tie between Nyeia's and Tajah's. "Both of them I had really close connections to. Tajah's sister was in that position of my mom. My mom had a lot of miscarriages before she finally gave birth to me."[92]

When I asked Dina and Tanissa to describe the Story Shop process in one word, Tanissa said, "Fun. Because Wednesday was the funnest day of the whole week, because the Story Shop came that day."[93]

But Dina's answer was very different. "Disappointing. I'm not used to telling my own stories. I'm used to telling stories about other people and making my own characters and explaining why they do things and finding out their biography. I'm not really used to telling people about myself, so it was weird for me. It wasn't overall negative, because I did find out

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[91] It's so important to remember that hearing someone's difficult story can sometimes cause our students pain—perhaps even reopen old wounds. Again, storytelling's ability to join the teller with his/her audience (Roemer, 1995) is not always a good thing.

[92] Another example of a story causing a student to realize that she has something in common with a classmate that she never knew she did before (see footnote [73]).

[93] It might be tempting to think that this tiny word ("fun") doesn't mean much, but if a storytelling unit can get students more excited about coming to class, it can boost attendance (as Ms. Garcia notes). Considering attendance is the base line requirement for all classroom learning, that's a pretty important potential benefit of implementing a storytelling unit. Plus, why shouldn't fun be considered a worthwhile classroom objective? There should be joy in the classroom. Just because a class is fun doesn't mean that real, higher-order thinking isn't taking place; the best classes have both.

some good things. It was just disappointing 'cause I thought I'd be able to make up characters and stuff. That's what I thought when I heard 'storytelling.'"[94]

In my focus group with Tajah and Alex, I also asked them for one word they would use to describe the Story Shop process.

"Touching," Tajah said.

"Why?"

"Because with your story and Linda's story and my own story, like, it kinda made me wanna cry a little bit. But, you know, I'm tough, so I know how to hold my tears back, but it was touching because you wouldn't think lookin' at her [Linda] that she would be in a situation like that."[95]

I asked Alex what his word would be.

"Personal."

"Why?"

"Because everybody told a personal story. Like, a *real*, deep, personal story…It was surprising. Like, you don't think people go through certain situations by how they act, but they actually—people really did."[96]

When I asked Ms. Garcia for her word, she thought for a few seconds before answering, "Journey."

"Why?"

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[94] It's important to remember that just because we might think that personal storytelling is intrinsically fun, that doesn't mean that all of our students will agree—some students prefer doing other things.

[95] Again, stories can pluck heart strings (which can be a good or a bad thing, or both). They can also teach students that there's probably more to the people in the room than meets the eye. I believe that's an important *life* lesson for students to learn.

[96] Alex echoes Tajah in saying that stories can surprise us by contradicting preconceived notions we may have already had about each other.

"It's a journey. It's starting small, and it's a journey into yourself, really. Just little by little, getting a little deeper and deeper and deeper until you're able to really just let out that story and share yourself. It's that journey toward self-discovery, y'know? Which actually ends up becoming discovery of each other. It's beautiful."[97]

When I asked Ms. Garcia if she would do this unit again, she said yes, regardless of what her future holds (i.e., if she ever changes schools). "There are so many positive things that come out of it that I would like to continue it wherever my life and my journey takes me. Seriously. I hope to take it with me into my other classes."[98]

Ms. Garcia's post-survey supported her interview answers, showing an overall growth of 15% in her sense of classroom community, including a 15% growth in spirit, a 22% growth in trust, a 17% growth in interaction, and a 13% growth in learning. Ms. Garcia disagreed with the statement, "I feel that each student in this class is interested in how the other students are doing" before the workshop; she agreed with it afterward.[99]

Ms. Garcia's students' post-surveys (conducted nearly four months after their pre-surveys) showed an average overall increase of 7% in their feeling of community after the Story Shop unit. More specifically, there was an average increase of 7% in spirit (how an individual feels about him/herself), an average increase of 5% in trust (how safe a student feels in the classroom), an average increase of 8% in interaction (how positively an individual feels his/her interactions with others in the classroom are), and an average increase of 7% in learning (how

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[97] Ms. Garcia reminds us that hearing each other's stories can make our students more *aware* of each other (Rosen & Rosen, 1988).

[98] Ms. Garcia's belief in the power of Story Shop is a testimonial to this work's potential worth to teachers.

[99] Ms. Garcia's overall increase in her feeling of classroom community was more than twice the class average, which makes sense considering her interview answers. For her, this experience was overwhelmingly positive. But, again (see footnote [84]), it's important to keep in mind that this was not necessarily a universal sentiment. It's nice to see that Ms. Garcia believes that her students care more about each other now, though. I think that's definitely true (with perhaps a few exceptions).

valuable an individual feels his/her learning in this class is). There were *seven* individuals (half the class!) who reported a significant (20% or more) jump in one or more category and only two (Terrain and Angelica) who reported a significant decline.[100]

Implications

You can find a more thorough discussion of the lessons that have come out of this work in Chapter 6, but it might be helpful to list some of the more important pedagogical implications made in this chapter here: (1) Even the smallest ways of bringing students' lives into the classroom (e.g., "One True Thing") can start the work of building interest, investment, and trust in students. (2) Offering a range of story subjects and intensities can let students know that they don't have to tell a heavy (or a light) story. (3) Teacher stories are important. They can strengthen the emotional connection between us and our students, and they can communicate to students that we trust them. While it's important to note that some students might find teacher stories intimidating or discouraging, this research suggests that, overall, the potential benefits of sharing stories with our students outweigh that potential risk. (4) Use caution when giving the stage to potentially triggering stories and/or to early versions of student stories. (5) The formal delineation and discussion of students' rights and responsibilities is necessary to the safety of the storytelling process. (6) The safe space aspect of a storytelling unit must be fiercely enforced and protected at all times. (7) You might want to put students who don't normally interact in the same group during a storytelling unit; it can lead to their feeling closer to one another.

[100] I think these numbers reflect well what I saw in participant observation; the things I heard in my focus groups with Tajah, Alex, Tanissa, and Dina; and my interview with Ms. Garcia. There seems to be an overall consensus that most of the shifts in classroom relationships were positive (with a few major gains—most notably, perhaps, in Dylan) but that there were some negative shifts as well, primarily due to violations of trust and a sense of safe space. For more on the encouragements, warnings, and lessons I gleaned from this work, please see Chapter 6.

Chapter 5: Storytelling and Identities

What follows is a narrative analysis of the perceived impact that this oral storytelling unit had on the four students in my small group. It addresses my, Ms. Garcia's, and the students' own perceptions of how this sixteen-week workshop affected their understanding of themselves as individuals. Instead of trying to capture each student's entire experience one at a time, I chose to braid them together. I thought this would allow the reader to follow along with all four students at about the same pace—and allow me to more clearly see the similarities and differences between their journeys (which are recapitulated at the end). Of course, as with Chapter 4, the following pages include no small amount of my own journey as well. I again use footnotes to separate much of my reflections and conceptual grappling in an attempt to avoid interruptions of the classroom narrative (or, more important, the student/teacher voices) as much as possible.

Tajah, Part I: "A'ight."

Snoop was one of my favorite characters on The Wire. She was tough. She kept up with the boys, she handled death with such aplomb ("How my hair look, man?"), and she wasn't afraid of *anyone*. When Tajah walks into the room on our first day, I immediately think of Snoop. Tajah's a light-skinned African-American girl with a low voice, strong eyes, and a masculine gait. She binds her breasts in tight sports bras, wears baggy clothes, and keeps her hair short. She wears a single diamond earring in her left ear. She doesn't speak much, but when she does, it's in thick African American Vernacular English, and people listen.

The last half of our first day is spent in a circle at the front of the room doing an activity called "One True Thing," in which everyone is supposed to say something about themselves that they don't think anyone else in the room already knows. Jessica tells us that all the girls in her

family have rhyming names; Alethea hates the sight of too many holes in a piece of paper. When it comes around to Tajah—sitting slouched in her chair, arms crossed, knees wide open—she says, "I like basketball." We have time to go around again, and this time, the students seem to share things that are a little more personal. Angelica likes to bite on soap-filled rags in the shower; Dina can't stand having an odd number of ice cubes in her glass. When it's Tajah's turn again, she looks at the floor for a second before saying, "I got bad anger issues." Her voice is quiet but unafraid. A few of her classmates nod. No one laughs.[101]

After class, Ms. Garcia tells me and my fellow storytelling coaches that Tajah is infamous in the school for being a serious discipline issue and a frequent fighter. Last year, she was always getting suspended, which landed her in summer school. Ms. Garcia says Tajah ended the year on principal's suspension (the second most serious disciplinary measure in the New York City public schools) for having instigated more than one violent fight. Ms. Garcia then tells us that—so far—Tajah has been relatively calmer this year; she's only gotten into a few arguments, none of which have come to blows.[102]

The next week, Tajah comes in with her cropped hair dyed blonde. "I like this blonde!" I say as she passes by me and heads to her seat.

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[101] My first impression of Tajah (captured in my notebook on the train ride home after that first day) is that she occupies a powerful position in the class. It seems that the other students respect—and maybe even fear—her.

[102] So it was that, a mere forty-five minutes after I had met her, I began to 'see' Tajah as a clichéd troublemaker, piquing both my interest in and my nervousness about potentially working with her. Months later, in my interview with Ms. Garcia, she said that Tajah had "no allies" in the class at the beginning of the semester, because most of the students were excited about the class and she was the only one trying to "manipulate the situation." Eventually, Ms. Garcia said, Tajah got Alex and Dylan as "her two little minions." Ms. Garcia's language in our interview made it seem as if she saw Tajah as a rather insidious force in her classroom (and maybe she was when I wasn't there—see footnote [82] of Chapter 4). After the interview, it made more sense to me that Ms. Garcia would describe Tajah the way she did on the first day. Unfortunately, I allowed her opinion to partly shape my own before Tajah had said more than ten words to me.

During the do-now, when students are supposed to be describing a sensory experience from the past week in their notebooks, I see that Tajah is working on something else. I approach her table and casually ask whose homework that is.

"Mine."

I laugh. "Well, obviously it's yours. I'm asking what teacher's."

"Hers," she says, nodding toward Ms. Garcia. "I came like two weeks late to this class."

"Oh, okay. Well, can you press pause on it for me?"

"Mmhm."

She starts putting it away, and I ask if bleaching her hair burned at all.

"Naw, it itches. It ain't burn me. Only time it burned me was like right here," she says, pointing to the back of her neck. "'Cause I went to the barbershop before I got it, so when you put the stuff on there, that burns."

I tell her that sounds like a perfect feeling to capture in her notebook.

"A'ight," she says, and starts writing.

Later that day, when we're gathering into a circle to hear my example story, Tajah tries to hang back to work on her make-up assignments, but I ask her to join us, telling her I saved her a seat. She gives me another "A'ight" and comes down. [103]

After I finish my story (about my middle school bully, Cliff), Linda leads a discussion about what the students noticed, liked, or wondered about. At one point, Tajah raises her hand.

"I got a question. A'ight, so. If you was to see him today, what would you do?"[104]

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[103] Tajah offered no resistance to my asking her to put her homework away or to join us in the circle. On the train ride home that day, I write in my notebook about how much that surprised me, based on Ms. Garcia's description of her as a serious discipline issue: "I haven't seen that side of her yet. In fact, I feel an incipient rapport there—one I hope I can strengthen in the coming weeks."

[104] Though I can't know for sure what led Tajah to ask this question, I like to think that it was her using 'mental time travel' (King, 2011) to put herself in my shoes and imagine what she would do if she saw Cliff again. Maybe she

I laugh and tell the class that I'd recently looked Cliff up on Facebook and that it doesn't seem like I'd have any problems taking him now. The class laughs, and I turn to Tajah: "Thanks for checking in on me, Tajah. I appreciate that."

She smiles.[105]

The next week, Tajah walks into class in a foul mood, claiming that someone stole her Arizona iced tea on the walk over. When class begins and she doesn't start the do-now, I ask if her notebook is in the bin across the room.

Hearing my question, Ms. Garcia says, "She doesn't have one."

"How do you know I don't got one?" Tajah asks defensively.

"I don't know. I teach you every single day; it's weird," Ms. Garcia jokes.

"I do got one. I just don't take it out."

Ms. Garcia and I share a heard-that-one-before look and chuckle.

"That ain't funny," she says sharply.

I walk over to her, aware now that Ms. Garcia and I had misread her level of seriousness.

"Somebody stole my Arizona," she repeats. "I spent a dollar on that. I ain't even open it yet."

I ask if she has a pen. She says somebody also stole that.

"I'm mad about my Arizona, son."

I decide not to pick this battle and walk to the front of the classroom to lead the do-now shares, leaving her simmering in the back of the room.[106]

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wanted to know whether I would do the same thing she imagined. (I feel it's important to note here that this is the *only* time in the entire sixteen-week unit that Tajah raised her hand to say something after an example story.)

[105] This was such a nice, albeit tiny, moment. Tajah's question made me think about what I *would* do if I saw Cliff Landers again, prompting me reflect on the anger I still harbor toward him all these years later and reminding me that telling a story about a person/event can allow us to identify and explore how we feel about that person/event (Romano, 1995; Bauman, 1986; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Polletta, 2012), potentially leading to personal growth.

The next week, Tajah didn't speak the entire class outside of a mumbled "good morning" when she came in late.[107]

Alex, Part I: "I'm gonna be nicer to people."

Alex was absent our first week, so the first time I see him is at the beginning of our second visit. He strolls jauntily into the room—tall and lanky with a perpetual, gap-toothed smile—sporting a fresh line-up, colorful sneakers, and black-rimmed glasses. He crosses over to the table where Tajah is sitting; they dap and he takes a seat.

Later that day, I tell the class a story about my middle school bully. Afterward, Alex says, "I wanted to fight that dude…I don't like people bullyin'. I don't like that. It makes me upset."[108]

I end class by asking someone to share a 'memorable moment' from today's class. Alex says, "I'm gonna be nicer to people."

Linda, Janet, Ms. Garcia, and I all share a quick smile. "I don't really think there's much more to say," I reply.[109]

The next week, during the Seeing the World Like a Storyteller do-now, Alex shares about a girl chasing after him and slapping him on the back of the neck for stealing her water bottle.

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[106] This was my first negative interaction with Tajah, and I take most of the responsibility for it. I can totally see how she could have taken Ms. Garcia's and my chuckle to be at her expense. We should have been more respectful, and we should have made an attempt to understand why she was in such a bad mood instead of downplaying it because the ostensible reason for it (a missing iced tea) didn't seem very important to us. I planned on apologizing after class, and I tried to catch her in time to, but she quickly left the room before I could.

[107] In my notebook entry that day, I blame the previous week's blunder for Tajah's chilly reticence and make it a goal to reach out to her the next week. That weekend, the online randomizer places her in my group, and I'm grateful that I'll have plenty of time to set things right between us (I also worry that I might not be able to).

[108] Alex reacts strongly in the negative to any mention of bullying, despite claims of never having been bullied himself (see pg. 80 of Chapter 4). It's an interesting display of empathy—or perhaps of connection to past experiences he denies. I can't know.

[109] Ms. Garcia told me after class that day that Alex had gotten a principal's suspension recently for starting a fight. There's no way of knowing whether this 'memorable moment' was a true indication of any change of heart, but perhaps it was—Schank (1990) reminds us that true learning can come from telling and listening to stories.

"You know what it felt like? You know how you get a shot for like, immunization? It felt like that. It hurt. And I was like, holdin' my neck. And then it started burning. It just felt like my skin was boilin'."[110]

Later that day, when Lisa tells a story about finally leaving an abusive boyfriend, Dylan points out her use of eye contact, prompting Alex to say, "I can't look people in the eye. I get self-conscious. They might think I'm ugly." He playfully shields his face with his hand.[111]

"Nobody would think that," I say.

At the end of class, Alex once again volunteers to give the day's 'memorable moment': "Don't be scared to face your fears."

The next week, Ms. Garcia tells a story to the class about clashing with her mother over a high school boyfriend. Afterward, Alex raises his hand and says, "That was deep. She was about to cry, and I was about to cry." He buries his face in the side of his hoodie, and the room laughs.[112]

When I ask for any comments on what they noticed or liked, Miranda says, "Don't discriminate or judge anybody based on their race."

"That!" Alex shouts, pointing at Miranda. "That! Exclamation point!…At the end, they kind of came back together, and it was a mother-daughter moment. What I got outta that is don't

[110] This was the first time I noticed just how expertly Alex can hold the attention of the class. Starting with the way he mimicked the girl's voice and ending with this hyperbolic sensory detail, his classmates (and we) were hanging on his every word, which he seemed not only to realize but to relish.

[111] I can't help but wonder (as I do in footnote [108]) just how much of Alex's poise is a true reflection of confidence and how much of it might be a mask he dons to protect himself.

[112] While I trust Alex's openness as authentic (the things he shares seem totally genuine), I also wonder if it might be his way of performing for us. He's a self-proclaimed 'class clown' and is clearly masterful at working the room.

let a silly situation or your own feelings get in the way of somebody who's close to you and that relationship."[113]

The next week, we split into small groups, and Alex is in mine. When I ask if they saw anything memorable over Halloween weekend, Alex says, "I seen a dude; he was dressed up in this costume, but it's inappropriate for me to say."

"Okay," I say, laughing. "I appreciate your censoring yourself."[114]

Later that day, I tell the class another story—this time about my first year of teaching in Boston Public. It begins with my walking into the school "bright-eyed and Ivy-League-tailed," thinking I was totally ready. Of course I wasn't, and the rest of the story is about just how unprepared I was.

Afterward, Linda leads the class in a discussion of the organizational decisions I made as a storyteller. She asks them how I began my story. Alex says, "You started with how you thought you was from Harvard an' all that," making everyone—especially me—laugh.[115]

At the end of class, Alex once again offers us his version of a 'memorable moment': "Everybody deserves a second chance, no matter how bad you may think they are."[116]

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[113] At this point, Alex is offering up his version of a 'memorable moment' before I even ask for one. He created this leadership role for himself, and his classmates eventually accept and promote it (see footnote [64] of Chapter 4). I consider this a great example of storytelling units' ability to offer students opportunities to lead in ways they might not have led before (Rosen & Rosen, 1988).

[114] Another example of Alex's excellent social skills. He knows how to say just enough to intrigue me and the rest of the small group but not enough to get him in any kind of trouble. His omission of any details actually makes this share *more* interesting/funny—which he seems well aware of.

[115] I think this is a great example of how teacher vulnerability through storytelling can help even out the power deferential in the classroom (Rymes, 2003; Read & Read, 1998). We all share a hearty laugh at my naïve younger self's expense. It's nice.

[116] At this point, I start to worry that Alex's newfound leadership role is shutting other people out from opportunities to share their own 'memorable moments.' I make sure to call on someone else the next week, and that student's share ends up fitting Alex's definition of a 'memorable moment' better than my original definition (see pg. 90 of Chapter 4). Student leadership is a powerful thing.

Dina, Part I: "I'm not God, mom!"

Dina catches my eye within the first five minutes of our initial visit. A petite girl with jet-black hair and dimples, she sits down at the front table and takes off her coat to reveal a lime-green sweatshirt advertising a cheerful-looking anime character. She also has a brightly-colored, plastic watch on and oversized, pink-tinted grandma glasses that cover up half of her tiny face. She seems like a girl who embraces her 'weirdness' and advertises it through her unique clothing choices; I like her immediately (anyone who has ever seen a picture of me in high school would understand why).

Dina is one of the first people to share when I ask for volunteers for our Seeing the World Like a Storyteller do-now. She tells us about being approached by a disturbing-looking man on the street: "He had wide, buggy eyes—and had a really creepy smirk. And he had a deep, raspy voice that was low." We poetry snap for her excellent description.[117]

Later, when we're all sharing during "One True Thing," Dina tells us that she can't stand having an odd number of ice cubes in her glass—she'll literally count them and put one back if the number isn't even. She also tells us that she's "obsessed" with the anime character on her sweatshirt; she shows us that her watch and her backpack are also adorned with his face. I smile, recalling the Pochacco merchandise I used to buy from the Sanrio store during my frequent high school visits to the Dallas mall.[118]

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[117] On the train ride home that first day, I wrote in my notebook about how surprised I had been when Dina was one of the first students to volunteer. Why? Perhaps I had assumed that she would be a shyer, more withdrawn student based on her eccentric look (which reminded me so much of the way that I dressed in high school, when I was diffident and so often afraid). My surprise challenged me to think of all the times that I had assumed other things about my former students based solely on their appearance. (Later, in my interview with Ms. Garcia, she told me that she "saw a little more confidence in the way [Dina] held herself" after this storytelling unit. Also, during my time working with Dina, she referred to herself multiple times as 'shy,' so perhaps *some* of my initial read on her was accurate—though that by no means excuses my assumptions.)

[118] I wonder to what extent the things we claim to be 'obsessed' with shape our identities. Perhaps our obsessions (be they professional, recreational, aesthetic, etc.) help form the projections of self that we own and then share with

On our second visit, Dina is once again one of the first people to volunteer during the Seeing the World Like a Storyteller do-now. She describes what it was like to keep her eyes open during a cartwheel: "My friends' smiles looked like frowns."[119]

When we eventually split into small groups, Dina ends up in mine. When I ask my four students to think of a sensory experience from the last week to share, Dina tells me, Tanissa, Alex, and Tajah about her new boyfriend (who she says is just as shy as she is) awkwardly trying to hold her hand. When she finally let him, she noticed how much bigger his hand was than hers. "It was warm, and I liked it," she says, smiling.[120]

Later, when we're working on a story generator worksheet, Dina tells us about a time when she clashed with her mother over her continuing struggle with acne.[121] One time, when Dina had a breakout, her mom took away all of her stuff and told her that she couldn't get it back until her face cleared up. "But I don't control that," Dina says. "I went, 'I'm not God, mom!'" The next day, her mom gave her stuff back and apologized.[122]

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others through stories—for narrative is how identities are constructed and defined (Wortham, 2001; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Currie, 1998; Bruner, 2002).

[119] By the end of our second visit, I notice that Dina's readiness to share and her apparent comfort in doing so contradict the lack of confidence I assumed when I first saw her (see footnote [117]). Again, storytelling units can offer our students opportunities to counter the assumptions we sometimes make about them based on their appearances and/or their early behavior (Shuman, 1986; Adichie, 2009; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

[120] In my fieldnotes for this visit, I made note of how skilled Dina already seemed to be in the art of conveying an entire story in the capturing of one tiny moment. Narrative gives events meaning (Rosen & Rosen, 1988), so perhaps Dina's capturing of this ostensibly forgettable moment allowed us (and perhaps herself) to see how much this nascent relationship may mean to her. (This is also one of the times that Dina refers to herself as 'shy'—see footnote [117].)

[121] For more on this story and Tajah's reaction to it, see pgs. 72-73 of Chapter 4.

[122] Later, in my fieldnotes, I wonder if Dina's recounting of this incident was—consciously or subconsciously—a way for her to process her relationship with her mother. Telling stories about the people in our lives allows us to identify and explore how we feel about those people (Romano, 1995; Bauman, 1986; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Polletta, 2012), and even in its initial and briefest form, this story is steeped in the interpersonal complexity of a mother-daughter relationship.

Tanissa, Part I: "The biggest thing that's ever happened to me."

Tanissa is the first student I meet on the morning of our initial visit. She shows up early for class, so I introduce myself in the hallway while she, Lisa, Janet, and I wait for Ms. Garcia's first period class to be dismissed. She cheerfully extends her hand and says her name, revealing a chipped front tooth, which only adds to the charm of her smile. Her hair is a bouncing crown of tight curls extending six inches off of her head in all directions. She wears tapered jeans, a fitted hoodie, and generic sneakers. She happily informs us that she has already joined the after-school Story Slam club and looks forward to working with us. She exudes warmth, confidence, and optimism.

Later that day, during "One True Thing," Tanissa tells the class that her clothing style is in a constant state of flux; she can never stick with a look. The second time around, Tanissa tells us that she, her mother, and her brother all chew ice religiously. She reacts and comments after many of her classmates' statements as well; it doesn't seem as if there's a single shy bone in this girl's body.[123]

On our second visit, I tell the class a story about my middle school bully.[124] Afterward, when Lisa asks the students for reactions to my story and Jessica says that "the stakes were high," Tanissa raises her hand to join the discussion.

"When I think of suspense, the first thing I think of is Cliff stood up and stopped her. I thought he was gonna actually say, 'You look nice in that shirt.' It was highly suspenseful, the

[123] On the train ride home after our first day, I wrote in my notebook, "It seems like Tanissa is already a leader in this class. She's also already interested in and pursuing storytelling. What can we do to make sure that this process is a challenge for her?"

[124] For more details on this story, see pgs. 59-61 of Chapter 4.

way she described it and built it up. She kept adding new details about that one moment to, like, keep us on the edge[125]…He thought he was so much harder than he was."

Tanissa and I make eye contact and share a smile.[126]

We split into small groups on our fifth visit, and Tanissa ends up in mine. While we're discussing one of the questions on the story generator worksheet ("Think of a time when you had to choose between somebody else's needs and your own needs"), Tanissa tells me, Dina, Alex, and Tajah about the time she had to choose whether to act on a crush she had on a boy or "stay confined" to her parents' rules. I tell her that that dilemma reminds me of the story Ms. Garcia had shared with the class the week before.[127] "Yeah," she agrees. She then tells us that she used to let other students in her eighth grade English class cheat off of her, but she stopped one day when a big project was due.[128]

The next week, Tanissa shares two stories about her mother with our small group. First, she tells us about the time she and her mom fell in love with an R. Kelly song and spent an entire week furiously scanning the radio looking for it. They finally found it as they were pulling up to

[125] In Tanissa's response to my story, I see evidence that she has already done some thinking about storytelling as a craft; her first response is to 'go meta' and comment on my choices as a storyteller—including what effects they had on her as an audience member. This is advanced, higher-order thinking.

[126] This small moment reminds me of the importance of teacher stories (Dutro, 2011; Coles, 1989; Kazemek, 1985; Greene, 1991; Remnick, 2014). Storytelling has a potential to break down barriers between people (Johnson & Freedman, 2001), and though this is only my second week with Tanissa and her classmates, I can already feel an incipient connection with them, which might have been expedited by my willingness to share this story.

[127] For more on Ms. Garcia's story, see pgs. 65-66 of Chapter 4.

[128] In my fieldnotes for this day, I write, "These small stories seem like Tanissa's attempts to define herself in relation to her peers and her family. It will be interesting to watch her crafting process unfold." Narrative is how identities are constructed and defined (Wortham, 2001; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Currie, 1998; Bruner, 2002), so these anecdotes that Tanissa chooses to share with our small group become part of the active construction of who she is in the context of us. (For more on Tanissa's eighth grade English anecdote and Tajah's reaction to it, see pg. 71 of Chapter 4.)

their house one day, and they were so happy that they stayed in the cold car a few extra minutes so they could dance to it together.[129]

Later, after Alex shares a story about losing his temper[130], Tanissa tells us that she once saw her dad beat her mom. "It's probably the biggest thing that's ever happened to me."[131] They had been taking a break, she explains, both seeing other people, and her dad got jealous. He read his wife's diary and found out that she was in a relationship with someone else. "It wasn't just spur of the moment, like he hit her. It was putting things away and sitting and thinking and reflecting, 'How am I gonna do this?'…it was really disturbing—the evil behind the way he did it." She had to sneak the house phone out and call her aunt to have her come stop the situation. "So, yeah, he really surprised me."

Alex, Tajah, Dina, and I all sit in silent heaviness for a few seconds.[132]

Tajah, Part II: "I know how my story is."

On our fifth visit, we split into small groups, and Tajah is in mine. When she comes in, I see that she has a new graffiti-font tattoo taking up most of her right forearm. It looks fresh and painful—peeling and bleeding in spots. "Ouch," I say. "Is that new?"

"It's supposed to peel."

"You are *brave*."

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[129] I love this story. What a beautiful example of how one tiny moment can reveal so much about a relationship.

[130] For this story, see pgs. 122-123 in Alex's strand.

[131] 'Big stories' involve events that significantly shaped the teller's life (Freeman, 2007), and this certainly seems to be one for Tanissa. Telling this big (and troubling) story can allow Tanissa to identify and explore how she feels about it (Romano, 1995; Bauman, 1986; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Polletta, 2012), but it can also cause her pain (Jelin, 2002). This story should not be taken lightly. (For more on the importance of this warning, see footnote [187].)

[132] In my fieldnotes for this day, I wrote, "Tanissa's mom must have been on her mind this week. Perhaps through sharing stories about her, Tanissa will be able to navigate their relationship. Maybe she'll be able to craft a story—like Dashiana did two years ago—that allows her to process how this event affected her relationship with both her mom and her dad." (For more on Dashiana, see pgs. 20-21 in Chapter 2.)

"That's my dad's name. I had to do it."

"That's nice."[133]

Later that day, when I call the class down to hear an example story, Tajah sighs.

"Life is so hard, right?" I joke.

"It's a chill day," she says, meaning it's *not* a get-up-and-move day.

"Isn't it chill to just sit around and listen to a story? I'm gonna tell another one. Don't you want to hear my story?"

"Oh, you tellin' a story?" she says, starting to get up. "A'ight, it's lit."

I laugh.[134]

After my story and the discussion following it, we head back to small groups to start a story generator worksheet. After looking over the six questions (two of which I've asked them to choose and answer), Tajah asks, "Can you make up your own? I'm thinkin' of one, but it's not none of these, though."

I flip the paper around and tell her she can write whatever she wants, if she already has an idea for a story. She sits and stares at the paper for a bit, not writing anything. After a minute or so, I ask her what story she's thinking about.

"I don't know how to write it, but it's in my brain, though. It's about my mom." She then tells me that she was born premature. "My mom told me that at one point in time, she tried to kill us both. She was just drinking a lot and just stupid stuff…That didn't work out; we both survived." She says when she was born, she was "mad tiny," small enough to wear doll clothes. And she would scream whenever her mom would hold her, like she knew she was trying to hurt

[133] I wonder at that moment about the stories Tajah must have about her dad. Would she bring him up?

[134] On the train tide home that day, I write about how grateful I am that Tajah and I seem to have moved past 'the infamous Arizona iced tea incident.'

her. When her sister would hold her, she would be calm. So her mom gave her to her sister for a while. She ends by telling me that she and her mom are close now.[135]

After class that day, I tell Ms. Garcia about Tajah's having shared a story with me. She acts surprised and tells me that she had written Tajah up two days before for being disrespectful and refusing to participate. She also tells me that Tajah and Dylan had gone to the principal after our first day and asked to be transferred out of the class. Apparently, they had told the principal, "I don't have any stories. This class is stupid. I'm not staying. You can't make me." The principal had turned down their request, which is why they were still with us.[136] (The next week, the first thing I ask Tajah is if she feels comfortable telling a story. She does. Does she want to stick with the one she told last week? She does. I say okay, wondering to myself what it was that caused that apparent shift over the last month—and whether it will last.)

At the beginning of our seventh visit, while my small group is sharing sensory experiences from the last week, Tajah tries to pass on sharing.

"What about something you smelled?" I playfully push, making Tanissa chuckle. "Something really gross or really great you smelled this last week?"

"A'ight," she begins, telling us a story about making food for Alex and his sister at his house and his sister farting right next to her and not saying anything. "It was mad silent. Like, five seconds later, I just smelt it. It smelt like a skunk."

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[135] Freeman (2007) argues that 'big stories' involve events that significantly shaped the teller's life; this certainly seems to be one, and it doesn't seem like an easy one to tell. Though Tajah was surely too young to directly remember most of this, that doesn't necessarily make it any easier to talk about. Creating a safe space wherein Tajah can discuss these events (if she wants to) is vital. If she doesn't feel truly heard, there's a possibility that talking about these painful things will only serve to make them more painful (Laub, 1992; Jelin, 2002; Shuman, 2005).

[136] I wish I had known about this as soon as it happened. The Story Shop Bill of Rights includes the right not to tell a story if you don't want to (see footnotes [28-29] of Chapter 4). Both Tajah and Dylan eventually wanted to tell their stories in front of the whole class (something that would not have happened if their transfer request had been honored), but that by no means justifies our not honoring their right to opt out when they wanted to (for more on this, see footnote [15] of Chapter 4).

We all laugh.

"A'ight, boo," she continues. "You couldn't even say excuse me or somethin'?"[137]

Later on that day, Tajah tells the group a story about losing one of her friends, a boy named Aryin, in eighth grade. She tells us she was skipping school one day and saw, "Rest in Peace, Aryin" on Facebook. "I was like, 'Naw, they're frontin'. I just seen him the other day.'" She tells us that the last time she saw him, he was giving her and some other kids who were cutting class a heads up that they were about to get caught. She says when she saw the Facebook post, she went straight to the school. "They was like, 'Yeah, he passed away.'" He died of an asthma attack just a week or so before the end of eighth grade, which he was passing on his second try. "He finally made it, and he didn't get to go to graduation with us." She tells us that they honored him at graduation with shirts with pictures of him, and every year, his parents throw a memorial gathering. "It kinda hurt me, because we was cool, and we was graduating that year together… He was mad cool…he was the class clown."[138]

I tell Tajah that her story does honor to Aryin's memory. I share with the group a philosophy that is commonly held in the storytelling scene—that everyone dies twice. The first death is a physical one; the second comes the last time someone says your name. So telling stories about the people we've lost becomes a way to pass on our memories of them, potentially keeping them alive in some way. I tell them that I want my funeral to be a storytelling show,

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[137] This is the first glimpse I get of how *hilarious* Tajah can be—her comedic timing is masterful. It's very different from the quiet, intimidating student I thought she was when I first met her. On the train ride home that day, I write about the gratefulness and shame that Tajah's dismantling of my initial assumptions about her makes me feel.

[138] I wonder if Tajah's telling us this story allows her to process this loss at all. I don't know. I do know that stories have the capacity to heal (McCaleb, 2003; Charon, 2007; Ramírez-Esparza & Pennebaker, 2007), but I also know that stories can hurt. Tajah saw Alex getting upset during this story (see footnote [40] of Chapter 4 and pgs. 123-124 in Alex's strand), but she kept telling it anyway (and I allowed her to). How can you weigh one person's potential processing against another person's potential pain? This is one of the tough questions teachers who implement storytelling units in their classrooms must grapple with.

completely unrestricted by tradition or time limits. I want anyone who has a story about me to be able to stand up and tell it. I tell them that I hope it goes well into the night.

Tanissa says, "I can understand that. When I think about myself dying, it's kinda comforting to think about after I die that people are still gonna talk about me."

They all nod, and it feels as if they understand exactly what she and I mean.[139]

The next week, Tajah isn't there. When I ask Alex where she is, Ms. Garcia overhears me and—behind Alex's back—mouths, "She's suspended."

"She's not feelin' well," Alex says.

Ms. Garcia shakes her head and repeats what she mouthed.

After class, I ask Ms. Garcia what happened, and she tells me she doesn't know exactly. Something in another class. It will be a few days.[140]

The next week, Tajah is back, but she comes in nearly ten minutes late. I tell her we had missed her the week before. She tells me she was suspended but "just for one day, though."[141]

We get to work on making some organizational decisions about the stories they've chosen to tell. I turn to Tajah to help her map out the story she says she wants to stick to (the one about her mom).

"I know how my story is," she says, seemingly trying to avoid having to write anything down. "Who's telling the story next week? I was gonna go next week."

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[139] This philosophy strikes such a chord in me. It feels like such an important reason to tell stories. We carry others' stories around with us and attempt to make them our own (Bal, 2009; Rosen & Rosen, 1988; Frank, 2012). We muddy those stories in the process, of course, but I believe that worthwhile vestiges of the original tellers remain.

[140] "I was disappointed to hear that Tajah got suspended again," I write in my notebook later that day. "I found it interesting that Ms. Garcia seemed to want me to know that, and Alex seemed only to want to cover for her."

[141] Tajah downplayed her suspension to me (if Ms. Garcia was indeed right about it being multiple days). I still don't know what it was for. She didn't offer an explanation, and I didn't feel I had the right to ask for one.

"That's awesome!" I say, surprised.[142] I tell her Terrain has already volunteered to tell one next week. "Can you go the next week?"

She nods. "It's gonna be lit," she assures me.

Alex overhears this and laughs.

I say if she's going to tell it in front of the class, she should get some notes down.

"I know how I'm gonna say it. I don't have to write it down."[143]

I tell her *I* find it helpful to make notes because it's easy to forget when I'm nervous in front of a group of people. She has nothing to write with, so I hand her my pencil. I ask her how her story will start.

"In the beginning, I'll talk about my moms. Her life. It's an emotional story." She's not writing, so I take notes for her on her story map.[144] I ask if there was a moment when she realized that she and her mom were going to be okay. She tells me about playfully wrestling with her mom and her stepfather (whom she calls dad—the tattoo was for him) when she was five or six. I ask what she thinks changed her mom's mind about her—what made her go from 'trying to kill her' to accepting her as a daughter? "I got all her features," she says. I ask if there's a more recent example of how close they've become. She says her parents always call, worried, if she stays out too late. I ask if she's an only child. "No, there's seven of us. Two of 'em died," she

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[142] Should I have been surprised? Perhaps some of my initial assumptions about Tajah are still stubbornly hanging on, despite all of the ways she has already proven to be more than the 'single story' (Adichie, 2009) I tried to pin on her our first day.

[143] Later, on the train, I write in my notebook, "I don't know if it's fear of failure, a lack of skills, a general hatred for it, or laziness, but Tajah will clearly do anything to avoid writing. I've never seen her write more than a few words." Later, once again, Tajah makes me feel ashamed for having made this assumption (see footnote [201]), and I chastise myself for having to learn the same lesson over and over.

[144] This was not the best idea. It could have come across as a *fine*-I'll-just-do-it move, a clearly-you-can't-do-this-so-I-guess-I-will move, or any number of other hyphenated-negative-phrase moves. If a student says she doesn't need to write her oral story down, then maybe she doesn't need to write her oral story down. My way of preparing a story isn't The Way to prepare a story. (Case in point, perhaps: Tajah later tells me that she never looked at these notes—not even once.)

glosses. As if anticipating my asking too many more personal questions, she says, "I'm in there a little bit, but my story's basically about her [her mother]."

"I think you're in there all over the place."

"Yeah."[145]

Alex, Part II: "When I get angry, I just walk away."

On our sixth visit, we continue working in small groups on the story generator worksheet. Two of the questions ask about times when they were surprised (in either a good or a bad way). I ask Alex if he's ever been surprised by someone's behavior. "Yeah," he says.

"Who?" Tajah asks.

"My own behavior." He then tells us about how one day in seventh grade, he got upset when a friend said something about his mom, and he didn't want to fight him, so he walked away and punched through the wired glass window on the classroom door, ripping his hand open to the bone. He shows us his scars.

He tells us that his mom told him afterward, "You shouldn't worry about it 'cause it's not true. You shouldn't let that get you, take it to that point where you have to damage yourself or maybe hurt others."

I ask if he learned anything from that incident.

"Yeah. I handle anger a lot better…When I get angry, I just walk away."

I ask if he's punched anything since.

"Yup."

"So it still sometimes happens."

[145] In my fieldnotes, I write, "It will be interesting to see how crafting this story affects Tajah's perception of her relationship with her mom, if at all." We *are* our stories (Eakin, 2008), so the stories we tell about the relationships in our lives *shape* those relationships. Perhaps this is especially true for those all-important familial relationships.

He nods.

I say maybe he can craft a story where the main relationship is the one he has with himself—it could include different examples of how he has dealt with anger. He agrees.[146]

The next week, Alex tells our small group about when he was asked to give a speech at his eighth grade graduation. "I was surprised that I got chosen to do that…I just had a B average, but, like, I was always the loud one…I went up there, and everybody started clapping. Even the sixth graders! It was amazing."[147]

The small group encourages him to tell that story contrasted with a time he got in trouble at school. I agree.

When it's Tajah's turn, she tells us a story about losing her friend Aryin to an asthma attack in eighth grade.[148] As soon as she mentions his name, Alex says, "Ahhhh" and looks down at the desk. At the end of her story, Alex drops his head into his hands—the heels of his palms pressed into his eyes—and starts sniffling.

I lean over to him. "Did you know him too? Are you upset?"

"Yeah," Tajah answers for him. "They was mad close."

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[146] Later, on the train ride home, I wrote in my notebook, "What a reflective young man Alex seems to be." It seemed as if he was identifying how he dealt/deals with anger *as* he was telling us this story. I wondered about the processing potential a story like this could have over weeks of working on it. I was also reminded—when Alex told us that he still sometimes hits things out of anger—of Lensmire's (1994) warning that the identities expressed in our students' stories are not always ones we are happy to see. But telling stories about events can allow us to learn from them (Schank, 1990), which could happen for Alex.

[147] I wrote in my fieldnotes for this day, "I see Alex building an image of himself as a leader despite his occasional discipline issues." The story of his eighth grade graduation speech has the possibility of imbuing that event with new meaning (Rosen & Rosen, 1988). Students deserve the right to tell their own stories—potential counternarratives to the 'single story' the media tends propagate about them (Shuman, 1986; Adichie, 2009; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This story has the potential to show Alex's classmates and teachers that there's more to him than just a principal's suspension for fighting.

[148] I wonder if Alex's talking about his eighth grade graduation is what led to Tajah's decision to share this story. I can't know. (For more on this, see footnote [138] in Tajah's strand.)

"Ugh, I'm sorry, Alex." At this point, Tanissa has brought over a box of tissues from Ms. Garcia's desk. I hand one to Alex, and he lifts his head to blow his nose.[149] His eyes are glassy, but he is no longer crying. I ask if he's okay.

"Mmhmm," he answers.

I'm not entirely convinced, but I choose not to push it.[150]

Dina, Part II: "We can be secret friends."

For our seventh visit, we planned on having a student tell the example story. Ms. Garcia was going to ask for a volunteer ahead of time, but she forgot, so we arrive that morning not having anyone ready. Dina and Tanissa are both in a Story Slam club that meets after school, so I ask if either of them has a story she's been working on that she'd like to practice in front of the class. I assure them that there's no pressure, as I realize it's last-minute.[151] They both say they have a story, but Dina seems more comfortable and eager to practice for the club's slam the next day, so she agrees to go.[152]

After I introduce her and the class poetry snaps in support of her bravery, Dina stands up, nervously adjusts her shirt, and opens her story: "I wasn't exactly supposed to be born."[153] The class is rapt. She tells us that her mother had had one stillborn child and two miscarriages before

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[149] For more on this incident, see footnote [40] of Chapter 4.

[150] I don't think I handled this well. I wish I had known that Alex's initial "ahhh" was a sign of distress. I thought nothing of it at the time, but that's because I didn't look at him until he put his head down. I'm sure I would have been able to tell from his face that he was upset.

[151] Ha—it's *never* true that there's 'no pressure' when a teacher asks a student to do something.

[152] I was lucky that Dina agreed to do this last-minute (storytelling units can offer students opportunities to become leaders (Rosen & Rosen, 1988), and Dina's going first is a brave example of leadership), but should I have even asked? For more on this decision, see footnote [62] of Chapter 4.

[153] What a first line! Dina is already skilled in the art of the 'hook,' but—again—it was dangerous for me to give the stage to a story that I didn't know anything about (see footnote [12] of Chapter 4). The subject of miscarriage is delicate and potentially triggering.

her own birth, so her parents had always been very overprotective of her. They had many rules for Dina, all of which were meant to protect her, but some of which seemed excessive to her—including the one that forbade her from even having feelings for a boy. Her dad was especially protective. One time, he told a male friend of hers, "Bring my daughter home by 8:00!" When Dina started developing a crush on a boy, her mom found out by reading her text messages. After a heated confrontation, her mom eventually accepted the crush. Dad did not, but Dina decided that she didn't care what her dad thought.[154]

When Dina finishes, the class poetry snaps and multiple students raise their hands to say what they noticed and/or liked about her story.

On our eighth visit, Dina walks up to our small group with a new haircut—a shoulder-length bob with bangs. I make a joke about how I must have inspired her, and we all laugh. She tells us that her dad freaked out about the haircut; he believes that a woman shouldn't cut her hair until after she gets married and has her first child. "Have you had a child?" Dina tells us that he had asked angrily. "Well," Dina had coolly responded. "I had a food baby yesterday." Alex and Tanissa laugh.

I recall out loud that Dina's other family story had been about her mom shaming her about her acne. I ask if her parents often attempt to control her appearance.

"My mom's really protective, and she sees me as her—like, my face is her face."

"Oh, man. Keep that line," I say.

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[154] Self narration allows us to sift through the myriad identities we carry around with us (Gilmore, 2001; Moffett, 1981; Wortham, 2001; Zinsser, 1998), and Dina seems to be navigating multiple identities in this story—the obedient daughter, the crush-addled teenager, the rebel. (Also, I wonder if the boy in this story is the new boyfriend she had told our small group about the week before (see footnote [120]). If so, telling this story could not only be informing Dina's relationship with her parents, but also her continued relationship with him.)

The rest of the group nods in agreement.[155]

On our tenth visit, Dina tells our small group that she has chosen a story to focus on and that it's one we haven't heard yet. She tells us that she went to a new school in a new neighborhood for seventh grade and had trouble making friends until she met someone who was as shy as she. She says this girl and she connected over being "weird and crazy." One day, she tried to stand up for her friend but ended up backing down when she herself became a bullying target. "We can be secret friends," she told the girl. Dina moved to another school and was relieved that she didn't "have to feel bad for this girl anymore." She then saw the girl again a while later, and she "was beaten up, she looked like she was cutting herself, and she acted like she didn't know me anymore. I felt so bad." When Dina asked her former friend what was wrong, the girl told her never to talk to her again, that she hated her. "When I went back to the new school, karma hit me—karma hit me so bad. From the second I got there, I did nothing, but I was pushed down the stairs, and people just wanted to see me get hurt…I didn't want to live anymore, but I didn't want to die either. I just didn't want to think about it anymore." She ends her story with a realization: "Karma was just there, and I felt everything that she felt. And then I realized that I wasn't a very good friend, and I regret every second of doing that to her, and I wish—if I could go back in time, with the things that I know now, I would probably defend her a lot better, and I would fight for her."[156]

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[155] What a beautiful line. Despite its brevity, it captures so much about Dina's relationship with her mother. Later, on the train, I write, "It will be interesting to watch the processing that these students will go through in the next few weeks as they craft their stories. How will they define/project the relationships in their lives?" Personal narrative gives coherence to the events of our lives (McAdams, 2007; Eakin, 2008; Roemer, 1995; Bruner, 2002). This coherence may be temporary and provisional (Percy, 2014), but it grants the storyteller agency (Maan, 2010), which can make it a worthwhile thing to devote classroom time to.

[156] In my fieldnotes for this day, I wrote, "This story seems to be Dina's way of processing the consequences of her actions in this particular relationship. In her mind, the bullying she experienced at the new school was a *direct* result of her having failed as a friend." Our stories shape us as much as we shape our stories (Tonkin, 1992; Richter, 1996;

Tanissa, Part II: "Ya gotta keep your head up, oooooh!"

At the beginning of class on our seventh visit, Tanissa tells me that she had written two poems since she last saw me, both about strangers she saw on the train. She tries to explain how she found these two people fascinating but not in any kind of romantic way. I tell her I completely understand. "I always thought it was weird," she says. "But my mom says it's because I'm a writer." I agree.[157]

On our next visit, Tanissa volunteers to tell an example story in front of the whole class. She begins by apologizing to anyone who has already heard the story at the after-school club's slam the week before. I assure her that this will be a new and different experience for everyone, even those who were at the slam—stories change every time they're told.[158]

She nods.

She begins by telling the class that she moved to a new town in Florida just before her ninth grade year, which led to her eating lunch alone in the girls bathroom on the first day of high school, scared about what was going to happen to her. "At the moment, it's all in the air. You don't know how things are going to turn out for you. I think it's scary for everyone." She tells us that she soon met another new girl and they became fast friends. This girl was the rebellious type, and she convinced Tanissa to sneak out of her house one night while her mother

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Wortham, 2001), and telling stories about events allows us to learn from them (Schank, 1990). Dina's story seems to be an act of framing herself as a contrite friend dedicated to righting a wrong and never repeating the same mistake.

[157] I love that Tanissa's mom encourages her to write—and that Tanissa is seeing the connection between writing and looking at the world a certain way. Romano (1995) tells us that we sometimes define our opinions about certain things by telling stories about them, and it seems like Tanissa might be accepting what some may consider her quirkiness by telling me a small story about it.

[158] Stories shift and grow with every telling (Englander, 2012), and Tanissa's story here was no exception. After she finished, the Story Shop manager (who was visiting our class that day) said that he had seen her tell that story at the slam and that this version was not only different but better: "It was that much richer to hear it the second time."

was passed out drunk ("she's done for the night; she's not getting up").[159] They had fun swimming in the pool, but Tanissa was anxious that she was going to get caught. "I considered myself bad, but I wasn't bad." She ends by telling us that she'd be happy never to do something like that again.[160]

The class poetry snaps for her, and I lead a discussion about what they noticed.

The next week, Tanissa tells our small group another story about her mom falling in love with a song—this time the silly pop song "What Does the Fox Say?" We all laugh, and I remind her of the other story she shared with us about connecting with her mom through music. I wonder if she could craft a story about her mom that is structured around songs. She likes the idea.[161]

The next time Tanissa shares a story with the small group, however, she chooses to return to the story of the night her dad beat her mom. This time, she prefaces it with the back-story of their relationship and her relationship with each of them before that night: "My relationship with my mom had never been good, and my relationship with my father had always been in the air, 'cause I didn't know him for the first eight years of my life, so I don't want to say that I felt alone, but I felt alone…I was indifferent to him. My mom was basically in charge of my life."[162] She then describes the beating: "I mean, I've had my fair share of beatings, but never like that. I

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[159] This was such a jarring moment for me in Tanissa's story. She dropped it so casually, as if it weren't an important part of the story but merely a minor plot point. It made me sad to think that something like this would be routine for Tanissa, but it's impossible for me to separate that sadness from my own experience with my mother's alcoholism. I see this as yet another reminder of how subjective, personal, and context-laden this research is for me.

[160] Once again, Tanissa seems to be defining herself in relation to her peers (see footnote [128]).

[161] Our stories shape our relationships with others as much as our relationships with others shape our stories (Tonkin, 1992; Richter, 1996; Wortham, 2001), so whatever story Tanissa chooses to tell—and however she decides to structure it—the crafting and sharing of that story will inevitably affect her feelings about her mother.

[162] Part of the storytelling process is stepping back from an event or relationship and assessing its impact on you, which is why each telling of a story creates new identities (Maan, 2010). At the beginning of this telling, Tanissa seems to be doing some 'meta' thinking/talking about her relationship with her mom and her dad.

knew what domestic violence was; I've seen my fair share of arguments, but it was new and scary and—I could add a whole bunch of adjectives there.[163] One of the most things I felt was extremely helpless…I wanna get in there and tell him to stop, but he's gonna hit me. 'Cause he is not there."[164] She tells us that her aunt came to get her and her brothers out of there. Her father was facing criminal charges for the attack, so the family moved back to New York. She ends the story with a hopeful scene of her and her mom singing together in the car during the long drive north ("ya gotta keep your head up, oooooh!").[165]

Tajah, Part III: "And that's my sister."

On our eleventh visit, I tell my small group that I need at least two of them to run their stories that day—their final performances approach! Tajah points at Alex, and Alex asks why Tajah can't go first.

"Wait, what are we doin'?" Tajah asks.

"You're just running your story for the sloppy first time."

"I don't wanna tell my story."

Alex says, "Yo, you were supposed to share in front of the whole class!"

"Yeah, I know, but I don't wanna share today. I'm tired."

I tell her Alex can go first while she "builds up the strength," being facetious.

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[163] This is one of a few times (see footnote [72] of Chapter 4) when students seemed to struggle to find the words to describe a powerful experience. This seems like a limitation of oral storytelling as a genre (and a limitation of language in general) and makes me wonder if Story Shop could incorporate other genres of storytelling—such as drawing and dance—into their workshops. (Also, Tanissa dropped the fact that she's "had [her] fair share of beatings" just as casually as she told us about her mother's drinking (see footnote [159]). There are so many stories behind every one of our stories—so many layers to a life.)

[164] This observation—that her father was "not there" because he was blacked out in anger—struck me as remarkably advanced for Tanissa's age. This will not be the last time that Tanissa's emotional maturity impresses me (see footnotes [188] and [235]).

[165] Though I think this is a beautiful way to end a hard story, I wonder on the train ride home whether the story that Tanissa has chosen to tell is too painful. It is by far the heaviest in the small group, and I worry—as I did with Tajah (see footnote [167] of her strand)—about the potential consequences of Tanissa's telling it before she's totally ready to.

After Alex's story, I ask the group for feedback. When I get to Tajah, she says, "I wasn't even listening."

"At all??"

"No."

"What's on your mind, Tajah, that you wouldn't be listening to his story? You got other things going on?" She nods. We move on to Tanissa's feedback. After, when Tajah is clearly in no mood to run her story, I ask Tanissa to go. During it, Tajah puts her head down. "You alright, Tajah?" I lean in and whisper. She shakes her head no. "You need to go get a drink of water or something?" No. "Do you not want to go today at all?" No.

When class is over, I dismiss everyone except for Tajah. I ask her if she's just tired or if she's upset about something.[166] She says she's just tired.

"You promise?"

"Yeah."

I ask if she'll run her story first for me when we get back from winter break.

"Yeah."

"You promise?"

"Yeah."

I tell her to have a great break, and she walks out. After she's gone, I tell Ms. Garcia how it felt like Tajah had completely shut down on me. She tells me that Tajah and Alex had gotten in

[166] I cringe listening to the recording of my asking this question. Instead of just asking her if she wants to talk about whatever's bothering her (as something clearly is), I ask this painfully leading question, which—of course—gets an utterly predictable answer. Then I make her 'promise' that she answered honestly. This whole exchange feels awful.

trouble with her yesterday, so she's not surprised to hear that. She also blames the time of year (how cold it is, the fact that there's a long break on the horizon, etc.), but I'm not so sure.[167]

Three weeks later, we're back from break, and Tajah walks in angry that the Spanish teacher took her phone away when it rang in class. "I ain't even have it out!"

"That's a tragic story," I say, joking (apparently not having learned anything from 'the infamous Arizona iced tea incident').

"Yeah," Alex jumps in. "You 'bout to tell *that* story?"

Tanissa, Dina, Alex, and I laugh. Tajah doesn't.

I remind Tajah that she had promised me she'd go first today.

"I don't know what to say. For real."

I tell her that's the point. I just want her to practice it first—a sloppy run—and we'll help her figure it out.

"I don't want to say a story right now."

"Tell us about your mom."[168]

"I don't know about her."

"Yes you do."

"I don't wanna talk about it right now."

"Okay. You can tell us a different story, then."[169]

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[167] On the train ride home, I write, "Tajah was the worst I've seen her. She wasn't rude, but she was *not* havin' it. It didn't seem wise to push her. What is going on? Our conversation at the end felt totally rote. This has to be more than just 'the time of year.' It's getting close to the performances. Is she doing the same thing Dion did two years ago? I don't want to push too hard." Dion was one of the students in my pilot study. He did not come to school our last two visits, and he did not attend the final performances, I suspect in part to avoid the pressure he knew I would place on him to perform his story publicly. I sent him a few emails, both before and after the final performances, but he never responded. His sudden exit continues to serve as an important reminder for me that storytelling units are more complicated than some victory narratives may lead us to believe (I had thought he was doing well). My failure to reconnect with him—even after the pressure of performing was lifted—remains both sad and sobering for me.

[168] I'm pushing when I shouldn't be. Maybe the story she planned to tell about her mom is too painful to talk about now for one reason or another. So why am I pushing, as if I'd learned nothing from my experience with Dion?

"I did! She took my phone!"

I suck my teeth, and Alex, Tanissa, and Dina laugh. "I know you're upset about that, but tell us a story about something that happened that *wasn't* this morning. If you don't want to tell your mom one, you don't have to. But I want you to tell us a story."

"She really took my phone! I'm gonna be in third period *bored*."

"Unbelievable," I say, exasperated.

"A'ight, I got a story," she says, practically interrupting me—as if she was just waiting for me to give up before she would give in. She starts telling us about her sister. "She always wanted to have her own kids, but she could never make 'em. She'd get pregnant, and then she'd lose the baby." She tells us that her sister was born sickly and has always been in and out of the hospital. The doctors didn't think she'd make it past thirty, "but she's thirty-six now, so that didn't happen." Now she's seven months pregnant, and the doctors are telling the family that she and the baby are both healthy. "But me and my family, we're still kind of worried, being that she's still ill." They're worried that the baby will live but that her sister might not. "We happy for her. Like, we want her to have the baby, and then we don't."[170]

We poetry snap for her, and the other small group members offer feedback. When it gets around to me, I tell Tajah that I'm jealous of how easily she can tell a story without practicing at all. I have to work my butt off to prepare a story. She smiles.[171]

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[169] Here, I *finally* realize that she might not be ready to (or might not want to) tell the mom story, and I stop pushing.

[170] In my fieldnotes, I write, "There's so little of Tajah on the surface of this story and so much beneath it." Flukernik (1996) argues that telling stories about formative events can allow us to interpret those events through the lens of present-day concerns. I wonder if Tajah's story will allow her to process her sister's past suffering through the lens of her current, successful pregnancy. What does/will this baby mean for Tajah and her family? Could the crafting of this story help her realize that in any way?

[171] This quiet moment gives me hope that my pushing won't backfire on me (though it certainly could).

The next week is our last practice before the performances. I ask Tajah what she's feeling.

"I'm feelin' like my stomach hurt right now. I ate a Hot Pocket this mornin'. Never again," making me laugh.

I tell them I want to get through all of their stories, and I use a randomizer app on my phone to see who will go first. Tajah's name pops up. "You just got *randomized*!" I say playfully.

"We can't have re-dos?" she asks, smiling.

"Nope." I say.

"A'ight, I'll go first." We all turn our eyes to Tajah, anxious to hear her sister story for the second time. "My sister's been in all our lives. Feel me? Growin' up, my mom, she hasn't been a mom." Tajah tells us that her mom was never home when she was little. "My sister was the mother. My mother wasn't doin' her job. All my mother cared about at the time was drinking...My mom used to drink with me when I was a baby. I came out at eight months. I was very sick...I wasn't supposed to make it. If it wasn't for my sister, me and my mother both would'a died. Because my mother told me how she wanted to kill both of us. She said she was over drinkin' and doin' stuff...She feel like if she wasn't gonna be here, she didn't want me to be here either." Tajah tells us that she used to cry whenever her mom held her but not when her sister did, so she lived with her sister—who couldn't have kids of her own—for a few years. "She wanted to be a mother so bad," but "she couldn't conceive 'em. They wouldn't last. One time, she was like five months, and when she went to use the bathroom, the baby came out in the toilet. She was hurt for a while." Eventually, Tajah tells us, she went back to live with her mom. "But to this day, I still say my sister is my mother. My mom understand that. She don't get mad

when I say that. Because she know what my sister done for all of us." Tajah tells us that when people give her sister a hard time because she can't have babies, she gets upset: "I be wantin' to fight, because that's my sister you talkin' to. In her situation, I would say my sister had over 300 miscarriages.[172] Now, she's seven months pregnant and she's doin' good...the doctors said that this one is a keeper. And that's my sister."[173]

We poetry snap for her and take turns giving her feedback for the final performance. When I ask her how she'd like to perform—for a new small group or in front of the class—she says, "I'll do it in front of the class."[174]

"Awesome."

Alex, Part III: "I can actually get things done."

On our eighth visit, despite Tajah's absence[175], Alex tells me, Tanissa, and Dina about being eleven and coming home from a great day of school—excited about a new girlfriend and a new videogame—to his mom telling him that his older cousin (whose first name is Alex's

[172] This feels like a 'truth' trumping 'reality' moment. 300 is an *impossible* number of miscarriages. Lehrer (2011) and Edelson, Sharot, Dolan, & Dudai (2011) tell us that the social aspect of live storytelling can sometimes cause us to make changes in our stories in an attempt to appear more likeable or deserving of sympathy, which might be what's happening here. But does the 'real' number of miscarriages Tajah's sister has had really matter? Maybe 300 *feels* right to Tajah—maybe that's her 'truth.' And, as O'Brien (1990) says, 'story-truth' sometimes trumps 'happening-truth' when it comes to capturing the essence of how an event felt to the storyteller. Despite their subjectivity, stories can convey a deep understanding of a person's own experience (Spence, 1982).

[173] In my fieldnotes, I write, "I find it fascinating that Tajah chose to blend her mother story (which I didn't think she felt comfortable telling) with her sister story from last week. Maybe—just maybe—she's starting to see the connection between the two. I see Tajah processing both the 'then' and the 'now' of both of these relationships in every telling of this story." Crafting personal narratives can give coherence to the events of our lives (McAdams, 2007; Eakin, 2008; Roemer, 1995; Bruner, 2002). This coherence may be temporary and provisional (Percy, 2014), but it can grant the storyteller agency, which makes it a potentially worthwhile endeavor (Maan, 2010).

[174] I wonder what played into Tajah's decision to perform in front of the entire class. Perhaps she believed that I preferred that and therefore felt pressured to do it. Perhaps she was inspired by how well this run went. Perhaps it was the chance that more people would come to 'know' her sister through it (see footnote [212]). I don't know.

[175] It's worth noting here that Alex tried to cover up the fact that Tajah's absence was due to a suspension—see footnote [140] of Tajah's strand.

middle name) was shot and killed. "He was not a trouble-maker. He was like me. His personality was exactly like mine." In a tragic mix-up, he was shot for wearing the same t-shirt as someone who had started trouble. Alex had just seen his cousin the day before, when he had praised Alex for doing well in school. "I wasn't crying. I was really sad, but it was to the point where I couldn't cry." He says other family members have died without taking "that big a toll" on him, but that this cousin and he had gotten really close since he had moved to New York.[176]

Tanissa, Dina, and I all offer our condolences.[177]

The next week, our whole small group is present, and Alex runs the story he has chosen to focus on—the one about his being asked to give the eighth grade graduation speech even after a year of getting in trouble a lot at school. "When she [his teacher] asked me, I was thinking in my head, I was like, 'Is she serious? Naw, she can't be serious.'" His grandmother helped him get the speech ready. He was nervous as the day approached. His mom flew down from New York (he was in school "down south" at the time). He'd never spoken in front of that many people before. "At first, my voice was kinda shaky, 'cause I was nervous and scared, and then as I got into it, I started feeling better and better." A few people came up to him afterward to compliment him on his speech. "That was just a confidence booster for me, 'cause there was teachers that didn't like me, and then I did it, and it showed them that—I'm a very silly kid, but at the same time, I can be very serious. I can actually get things done." He tells us that a teacher

[176] Painful events may lose some of their power when trapped in narrative form (van der Kolk & van der Hart, 1995; Plumwood, 2000). Though publicly talking about such events in the context of school isn't necessarily a good thing (see footnote [83] of Chapter 4), this story seemed to be something Alex wanted to share with me, Tanissa, and Dina, and we respectfully received it.

[177] When Alex came up in my interview with Ms. Garcia, she said, "He is somewhere in the middle." He's loud and kinesthetic and he likes to be verbal, but he doesn't always perform well academically. "Alex struggles with writing, so it's easier to pretend to be cool. He struggles with getting all those great thoughts out on paper. It's sometimes a difficulty for him." Ms. Garcia told me that whenever Tajah would be absent, Alex would hang out with other students and get into intellectual conversations and enjoy that. But if Tajah was there, "he wanted to be cool." I wonder what effect—if any—Tajah's absence on this day had on Alex's decision to tell this story about his cousin.

with whom he had clashed early on turned out to be one of the ones who had recommended him to tell the speech. After describing how he had flipped out on her, he paused for a second before saying, "I used to be very rude; I just noticed that."[178]

On our last class before the performances, Alex runs his story for the second to last time. "I was in eighth grade, and this teacher named Ms. Johnson was rude and mean and tight disrespectful." Alex tells us about how he and she viciously argued one day after she told him to shut up. Alex ended up in in-school suspension. At the end of the school year, Alex was asked to give a speech at graduation. "I was kinda shocked. I didn't take it too seriously. I'm like, 'Me? Really?'"[179] He wrote multiple drafts of the speech. On graduation day, he was nervous. "My mother, she was supposed to come down, and she was like, 'Oh, I can't make it,' so I'm like, 'Okay.' But as I'm goin' up to do my speech, somebody says my name. So I look, and it's my mother. I got hyped."[180] The speech went well. "After that, I went out to eat, and my mother just looked at me and said, 'I'm very proud of you.' And, y'know, it touched me. She was serious. And, I don't know what it is, but with her, she'll say one thing, and then I get emotional. So she said that, and I started tearin' up a little bit. And I'm like, 'Chill, chill. Naw, I got females out here. Chill. I can't do that right now. Not right now. When we get in the house.'" When they got home, his mom made him watch the recording of his speech. "To me, it was a learning

[178] What a great example of how telling a story about an event can sometimes lead to our having realizations about that event (Flukernik, 1996). On the train ride home that day, I write, "I love the processing that Alex seems to be going through with this story. Not believing that the teachers really wanted him, owning up to the responsibility, and seeing how it changed him (and his teachers' opinions of him)." Again, our stories shape us as much as we shape our stories (Tonkin, 1992; Richter, 1996; Wortham, 2001).

[179] So Alex didn't used to see himself as a leader. His story reminds me of the literature on self narration's ability to allow us to sift through our various personae (Gilmore, 2001; Moffett, 1981; Wortham, 2001; Zinsser, 1998).

[180] Here's another example of each telling of a story being different (Englander, 2012). This (his mom's not being able to make it and then showing up to surprise him) is a new addition to this story—and a great one, I think. In my fieldnotes that day, I wrote, "Mom has now taken on a bigger role in Alex's narrative. Could this be shaped at all by current events in that relationship? I don't know." Telling a story about an event or a relationship allows us to identify and explore how we feel about that event or relationship (Romano, 1995; Bauman, 1986; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Polletta, 2012), which might be happening here with Alex and his mom.

experience...They didn't think I'm a bad kid and just toss me aside, let me go through life like that. They actually cared. Gave me a chance to show what I really have."[181]

When Ms. Garcia comes around to take requests for how everyone wants to perform (in new small groups or in front of the whole class), Alex tells her that he wants to do it for the whole class. He then looks right at me, and we both smile.

Dina, Part III: "I would do it way better than anybody else could."

Two weeks after we heard Dina's story for the first time, I ask her to run it again, this time with a timer running (her story had been well over ten minutes on the first run, which was fine, but the Story Shop's goal is for students to craft stories that are four to six minutes in length). This seems to make her more nervous.[182] The story sounds less natural this time—more anxious and awkward. She uses language that doesn't sound like her—"she was the bomb diggity," "they were just ratchet," and "I'm not her friend anymore—beef." She also left some of the things that we had liked the most in her first run out and added some qualifiers/anecdotes that didn't seem necessary.[183]

When she finishes, the group points out some things they liked, some things she should bring back from the first telling, and some things she can still cut (this run was nearly nine minutes long).

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[181] I loved this beautiful, reflective moment at the end of Alex's story.

[182] Was the timer really necessary? The Story Shop's time limits come from the need to fit an entire classroom's performances into one or two sessions, but I should have done a cost/benefit analysis of timing Dina's story before placing a ticking timer in front of her on only her second run.

[183] On the train ride home, I write in my notebook, "Was the timer the only reason that Dina was nervous and this run was a bit awkward? I can't tell." The social aspect of live storytelling can sometimes cause students to make changes in their stories in an attempt to appear more likeable (Lehrer, 2011; Edelson, Sharot, Dolan, & Dudai, 2011). Perhaps Dina's unusual (for her) diction was an attempt to sound more like her peers. And perhaps Alex and Tajah's playful ribbing in response to that uncharacteristic word choice (see pg. 80 of Chapter 4) exacerbated the nervousness that my ticking timer initially evoked.

"Just try to fit all the feels in this you possibly can," Tanissa says.[184]

We all agree.

The next week is everyone's last chance to run his/her story before the final performances. When it's Dina's turn, she starts with, "I was a shy child. I didn't really like socialization." She tells us that she only had one friend in seventh grade: a girl named Cyndi. But when Cyndi started getting bullied and Dina was put in a threatening situation (a group of girls surrounded them at a bus stop), she renounced the friendship, telling Cyndi, "We can't be friends anymore because I was just threatened. We can be secret friends." By the end of the year, "I wasn't having any more problems, but she was being verbally abused." Dina's family moved, putting her in a new school. A week or so later, Dina went back for a test and saw Cyndi. "She looked so messed up. It kinda hurt to see her like that." She went up to her to say hi, and Cyndi said, "Don't talk to me anymore. I hate you." Dina left and never saw her again. At the new school, "Karma was like, 'Hey, I'm gonna treat you the way your friend was treated,' so I got bullied…If I could go back in time and face what I did, I really would, and I would do it way better than anybody else could."[185]

We poetry snap, and I ask Dina if she feels ready for the final performance. She nods. When Ms. Garcia comes around to ask for everyone's performance preference, Dina tells her that she'd like to tell her story in front of the whole class. I smile—I had expected as much.[186]

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[184] I love this line. I saw it as Tanissa's more supportive reaction (as contrasted to Alex and Tajah's) to Dina's awkwardness. Storytelling is at its best when the teller taps into real emotions and portrays them authentically.

[185] Again, Dina truly believes that the bullying she experienced in her new school was a direct result of her ditching a friend in need. Dina was much more comfortable this run; the story felt more natural. Each telling of a story is different (Englander, 2012). I find it interesting that we didn't get the girl's name until this, the third time we heard the story. I wonder to what extent the decisions to initially omit her name and then finally to give it were deliberate.

[186] Dina turned out to be one of the class's biggest leaders during this storytelling unit, which Ms. Garcia says was a change from how she was before we came in. For more on this, see pg. 85 of Chapter 4.

Tanissa, Part III: "It's a big story."

At the end of class on our twelfth visit, Tanissa stays after dismissal to tell me that she's worried that the story she's chosen is too "dramatic," too "heavy." She says this as though her concern is more for us as listeners than for her as a teller—like she's comparing it to the other group members' lighter stories and doesn't want to bum us out. I tell her that we shouldn't be her main priority, that she needs to be. If the story is too heavy for *her*, then she shouldn't tell it. She says she just needs some time to "dissect it." "There's a *lot* to it; it's years of history between people." I take her email address and tell her I'll send some revision notes if she still wants to tell it, but I remind her that she has no obligation to; she can always choose another story. "I know, but it's crunch time now," she says. "I'll fix it up."[187]

Before class starts the next week, Tanissa tells me that she's supposed to be senior but that she's a junior because some of her Florida classes didn't transfer. "I'm doing so much better this year. I'm doing better than I've ever done in school. I have a B average. I'm doing very well."

"That's because this school is easy," Dina says.

Tanissa ignores this. "I feel this extra year was given to me so that I could get myself together."

I compliment her on her maturity.[188]

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[187] I should have taken this conversation as clear evidence that Tanissa was not totally comfortable with her story choice. Stories have the capacity to heal (McCaleb, 2003; Charon, 2007; Ramírez-Esparza & Pennebaker, 2007), and traumatic events may lose some of their power when trapped in narrative form (van der Kolk & van der Hart, 1995; Plumwood, 2000), but this process is dependent on a safe space and fully attentive witnesses (Laub, 1992; Jelin, 2002; Shuman, 2005) and should *never* be rushed because it's "crunch time." I should have taken this conversation much more seriously. Though Tanissa ended up thinking that her experience telling this story was a positive one (see pg. 156) there was also a very real risk that this could have gone badly.

[188] Though this statement isn't made in the context of a crafted story, Tanissa does seem to have realized that taking an extra year to finish high school is actually a good thing for her, and she's using narrative (e.g., this is how I was

Later that day, she runs her story for the last time before the final performances. "My parents had problems," she starts. They fought all the time, "which affected my relationship with both of them...We were very dysfunctional."[189] After they moved to Florida, her dad lost his job and had to move back to New York. "Being apart just made the fighting [between her parents] worse." At this point, her dad was "kind of irrelevant to my life." She and her mom "got a lot closer after my father left." Her mom started dating someone, and Tanissa was the only person who knew. Then her dad came to visit. Before he was to arrive, Tanissa's mom came to her room and just said, "'No words. Nothing.' And I understood. Because no one could know. Especially, of all people, my father."[190] As Tanissa is leading up to the big fight, I have to cut her off because the period is over. "I know," she says apologetically. "It's a big story." I assure that even big stories can be told in five minutes, though certainly not easily.[191]

Ms. Garcia comes by as the students are packing to see who wants to tell their story to the whole class and who would rather tell it to a new small group. Tanissa surprises me by being the only student in my small group to request the small group performance.[192] I ask her if she chose that because her story is sensitive.

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then, this is how I am now) to explain that to me. Personal narrative gives coherence to the events of our lives (McAdams, 2007; Eakin, 2008; Roemer, 1995; Bruner, 2002).

[189] This is the first time that Tanissa has used the pronoun "we" when talking about the dysfunction in her family. I wonder if this ostensibly small outward shift represents a bigger internal shift in perception. I don't know.

[190] This is a new addition to the story since we last heard it, and it feels like such an important one. I love that the strength of Tanissa's relationship with her mom shines through in every story she tells about her.

[191] Stories can never completely capture the events that they narrate—much less the lives of their tellers (Butler, 2005; Tonkin, 1992; Shuman, 2005)—but in their attempts to capture them, stories can reveal thoughts and emotions that the storyteller has about those events, which is such an important potential processing benefit of storytelling.

[192] I thought Tanissa would be the first person to volunteer to go in front of the class, but what did I know? What right did I have to assume that? There's a chance that she didn't want to tell this story at all but felt pressured to (see footnote [187]). Students should never feel pushed to share something they're not totally ready and willing to share.

"The story's not that big of a deal to me," she says. "It's just, I've already done it in front of an audience and in front of the class."

"Okay," I say, wondering if there is more to her decision than she's letting on but not wanting to push.

On the day of the small group performances, I sit in Tanissa's group, along with Jessica, Angelica, and Alethea.

"You bein' in this group is making me nervous," Tanissa says, smiling. "'Cause you were on me for cracking this down to five minutes."

I chuckle and tell her that she has some wiggle room because we've built five minutes of feedback time into everyone's performances.[193]

When it's her turn, Tanissa starts with, "A few years back, my family moved to Florida. We were not all on good grounds with each other. Maybe because I've had a rocky relationship with both my father and my mother, and they've had a rocky relationship with each other." She then tells us how her dad lost his job and went back to New York. "Once my father left, my mother and I had gotten a lot closer. So I knew a lot about her life." Her mom started seeing someone, which only Tanissa knew. Then her father came down for a visit. Her mom and she shared a silent moment[194] before he came that made it clear that the boyfriend would remain a secret. The fighting started almost immediately upon her dad's arrival. A few days later, her

[193] Tanissa seems to be [mostly] joking here, but this is quite an indictment even if it was lightheartedly delivered. I certainly never intended to make Tanissa feel nervous or to convey that I cared more about The Story Shop's time limits than I did about her or her story, but perhaps my behavior ended up doing/conveying that anyway.

[194] In this version, the exchange that Tanissa has with her mom before her dad arrives is silent. Again, maybe the 'reality' of what happened in that exchange matters less to Tanissa's story than her limning what it *felt* like to be there with her mom in that moment. (For more on the fuzziness of 'truth' and 'reality,' see footnote [172] of Tajah's strand.)

mom left to spend the day with her aunt and "drink and vent."[195] Tanissa woke up from a nap to find her dad angry. He called his wife, pretending the kids were asking about her ("we hadn't been asking about her") and asking her to come home.[196] Tanissa noticed that her "mom's room was torn to shreds" and that her diary was open on her bed. Tanissa knew that her mom "holds back nothing in her diary," so she knew this was going to be trouble. "My mom is gonna come back, and it's not gonna be pretty." When Tanissa's mom got home, her dad confronted her on the porch. Her mom pushed her way into the house and told Tanissa to get her brothers ready to go. "My father corners her and pushes her to the ground." This had never happened before. And her father was a big guy; he spent the first eight years of Tanissa's life in prison, where he did nothing but work out. "So this man is beating my mother like they are two men in the street, and just going at it, and my mom is not making a sound. And I…I…just talking about it, I had no idea what to do."[197] She told her brothers to wait. She ran into her mother's room, got the house phone, ran back out, and called her aunt. "My dad is beating my mom. You need to come here and deal with it." Her aunt came and talked him down until she and Tanissa's mom got a chance to run out the back door. They took the keys so he couldn't follow them. "It was weird. It wasn't even like I was disgusted. I mean, it took a while for that to set in. I don't know. It was new."[198] When they had to move back to New York, Tanissa says her mom was stressed out in the car. A

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[195] Once again, Tanissa's mom's drinking is mentioned in a relatively casual way (see footnote [159]).

[196] This new addition to the story does a great job at revealing the premeditated evil of her dad's attack.

[197] Once again, Tanissa is unable to fully capture this moment in words (see footnote [163]), though this is the most detail she has given regarding this scene. It's heartwrenching. She and I make teary eye contact throughout it. Perhaps the difficulty she's having in describing this event is a reflection of the difficulty of the memory itself. Van der Kolk and van der Hart (1995) say that it is precisely the process of capturing a traumatic event in language that can allow someone to begin healing from it. Perhaps Tanissa's inability to thoroughly describe this experience is evidence that she is still grappling with the pain caused by it. I don't know.

[198] This line struck me as evidence that Tanissa was still in the midst of processing what this event meant and will mean for her relationship with her father. (She later confirms this in our focus group interview—see pg. 157.)

song came on while the radio was scanning ("ya gotta keep your head up, ooooh!") and Tanissa stopped it, started singing along, and nudged her mom to join her. "It'll be fine," she told her.[199]

Jessica, Angelica, Alethea, and I all poetry snap when she finishes. I say that I like that she and her mother seemed to have switched roles in a way—Tanissa became the caretaker.

"Yeah," Tanissa says with a sad smile.[200]

Tajah, Part IV: "It's good for y'health."

The day of the whole-class performances arrives, and despite a giant snow storm that has rolled through the city—reducing our attendance to just six students—Tajah comes to class. When I ask her how she wants me to introduce her ("what's something you don't think anyone here already knows?"), she tells me that she likes to write. "I went to a journalism school before." Apparently she had transferred to this current school because the journalism-focused one was too far from her house. "My mother wanted me closer."[201]

When it's Tajah's turn to go up on stage, she squints into the bright lights for a second before speaking. She begins with the story that her mother and her sister have told her—about her mother drinking while she was pregnant with Tajah. She was born one month premature and stayed in the hospital for a few months, wearing doll clothes. "The doctors thought I wasn't gonna live 'cause of all the alcohol my mom was drinkin'. At the time, my mother tried to kill

[199] I really love the way Tanissa chose to end this story. I think she did a great job cutting and reworking this story so that it was completely framed around her relationship with her parents and how this momentous event affected them.

[200] It seems to have taken a lot out of Tanissa to share this with us. When we tell a story, our present self simultaneously reports and creates a past experience (Wanner, 1994; Butler, 2005; Kahneman, 2010), which can be painful if that past experience was a difficult one. Though Tanissa claims that telling this story was a positive experience for her (see pg. 156), she might not always see it that way.

[201] Shame on me for assuming the opposite about Tajah (see footnote [143]). This late revelation reminded me of Shuman (1986) and Bell's (2010) charge for teachers to allow students to tell their own stories; they can act as powerful counternarratives to the 'single story' that media outlets (and we!) sometimes propagate about them (Adichie, 2009; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

me and her. She didn't want to live. So bein' that she didn't want to live no more, and she was pregnant with me, she didn't want me to live neither, so she wanted both of us to go to heaven. I doubt she'd'a went to heaven, though."[202] Tajah tells us that in the hospital, whenever her mom tried to touch her, she would scream. Whenever her sister touched her, she was calm. So her mother gave Tajah to her sister for two years. Tajah tells us that "[her] mother went into a depression," that she was so depressed that she stopped walking; she just stayed in her room and lost the use of her legs. (She had polio and was wearing a brace; "she had a chance to walk, but she gave it up 'cause of how she felt." Now she's in a wheelchair.)[203] Tajah's sister took care of Tajah's brothers as well during this time when Tajah's mother was never around. All of Tajah's sister's attempts to get pregnant ended in miscarriages, including one lost in the toilet ("y'all should know how she felt about that").[204] "My sister is the most greatest person in the world," Tajah says, swaying back and forth under the lights. She still takes care of Tajah, her brothers, and her brothers' children. Tajah and her mother both call her "mommy" sometimes, "out of respect." Now she's thirty-six and seven months pregnant. "The doctors say this one is gonna be a successful one…He's the only one out of all his siblings that survived."[205]

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[202] This felt like a totally extemporaneous statement. I wonder if it reflected an opinion that was being formed at that very moment. I don't know, but I do know that our stories shape us as much as we shape our stories (Tonkin, 1992; Richter, 1996; Wortham, 2001), and that sometimes it's precisely through telling a story about something/someone that we come to understand how we feel about that person/thing (see pg. 157 of Tanissa's strand).

[203] It's always fascinating to me to watch which details stay, which ones leave, and which ones change with every new telling of a story (Englander, 2012; Maan, 2010). This is the first time that Tajah has brought her mother's polio up at all. It almost sounds as if she's blaming herself for sending her mother into the depression that took her legs.

[204] The air in the room was heavy here. I wonder if this was another example of a story that could potentially feel abusive for someone to hear (see footnote [12] of Chapter 4). What if one of the students or the adults in the room has gone through a miscarriage? This is something I did not think about but definitely should have (I knew that this was going to come up in Tajah's story). Teachers who want to implement storytelling units into their classrooms need to be aware of their students' stories' potential to hurt.

[205] This was the fullest version of this story that I heard throughout the entire unit. Tajah ended up marrying the mom story she told me early on with the sister story she shared with the small group, adding brand new details and nuance the day of. I think it turned out to be a really beautiful tribute to her sister.

* * *

An hour or so after Tajah's performance, she and Alex sat down with me for our focus group interview. My first question was how would they describe the storytelling unit they just went through to someone who wasn't there.

"It's good for kids such as myself," Tajah said. "Because when ya'll first came to the classroom, I had the attitude like I wasn't gonna do none of it, 'cause I don't like talkin' about my feelings at all, or like how I feel period, or about people or about my life. 'Cause I don't like people in my business. So I was like, 'Nah, I'm just gonna sit here'…So I would say it made a big impact on my life because as y'all kept comin' on Wednesdays or whatever, it was like I got more, like, how do you say? I opened up a lot. I told my story. And I feel good about it."[206]

When I asked if they would do something like this again, Tajah said, "Yeah, I would. Definitely. Like, if it was a class to sign up, I would definitely encourage people to sign up for the class. I would say to people, 'If you take this class, it'll take a lot of stress off you.' Like Nyeia. Yesterday, she told her story in the group. It was a story that really touched me a lot. And after she told her story, she felt better. She felt good. She just broke out of her shyness a lot, 'cause she just said she was very shy and she don't like to talk to people like that, and bein' that the Story Shop came and everybody had to tell they story, bein' that she finally told her story to somebody and explained how she felt, and she cried a little bit, she felt better about her situation."[207]

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[206] Paul John Eakin (2008) speaks of the "psychological gratification" of autobiography's "teller-effect" (p. 77), which Tajah seems to be referring to here. Oral storytelling units can also cause positive behavioral shifts (see footnote [70] of Chapter 4), potentially opening initially resistant students like Tajah up. (But is this always a good thing? See footnote [88] of Chapter 4.)

[207] I want to honor Tajah's perception that Nyeia's experience was a positive one (especially considering I was not there to hear it), but maybe her tears were evidence of it *not* being such a positive experience for her. I can't know. (See pgs. 99-100 of Chapter 4 for more on Nyeia.)

I asked Tajah if she also felt better after telling her story.

"Yeah."

I asked her why she thinks that is—that people sometimes feel better after telling stories.

"Because it'll be a lot of stress off you, and you'll feel a whole lot better about yourself and what happened.[208] And you won't hold it in and you won't be so upset at yourself and with other people, and you'll learn to get used to other people and being able to express your feelings, so you'll feel better…It's good for y'health."[209]

When I asked if they learned anything through the process of putting their stories together, Tajah said, "I realized that miracles can happen, and I realized that there probably is really a god, because god took the time to—even though my sister is very ill, like, to where the doctors thought that she wasn't even gonna make it because of the diseases she got, 'cause she's in and out the hospital, she's always in pain—so the doctors said my sister wasn't supposed to live until she was twenty-somethin', but she survived, and she's still living, so I really feel like miracles can happen, because he blessed us with her, and she's the key to us.[210] I feel like once—god forbid, which I hope it doesn't happen—but if my sister was to ever pass away, I feel like my family would just break apart instantly, because she's the only thing that's holdin' us together."

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[208] It seems as if Tajah might agree with Tanissa's explanation of how telling stories can help you make sense of tough events (see pg. 156 of Tanissa's thread) and therefore feel better about them.

[209] I think this is a nice list of the potential benefits—both internal and external—of storytelling. Telling stories about events allows us to learn from them (Schank, 1990), and traumatic events may lose some of their power when we trap them in narrative form (van der Kolk & van der Hart, 1995; Plumwood, 2000), though—again—this process is dependent on a safe space and fully attentive witnesses (Laub, 1992; Jelin, 2002; Shuman, 2005). In short, Tajah is right: storytelling *can* be good for your health.

[210] This thought seems as extemporaneous as it is poetic ("she's the key to us"). I can't tell, however, if these are things Tajah already knew/felt, or if some of them came to her through the storytelling and/or interviewing process.

I asked if she already knew these things or if it was putting the story together that helped her realize some of them.

"When I found out she was pregnant, then I started realizin' a lot of things."[211]

When I asked how they ended up choosing the stories they told, Tajah said, "I chose this story because my sister, she made a big impact—not only on my life but my whole family life. I don't even think I would be here if it wasn't for her, and I don't think my mother would've been here neither. Or my siblings…And I feel like she needed recognition. She needed to be known for that, for something that she did, 'cause what she did was a beautiful thing. She made our family stronger."[212]

Alex, Part IV: "I felt like I just built more trust for people."

The day of the final performances arrives. Despite a snowstorm that causes all but five of his classmates to be absent, Alex comes to school. When it's his turn to go, he looks a little nervous standing up there under the lights. But as soon as he gets his first laugh, he relaxes and finishes the story like the natural performer he so clearly is.

His story opens with, "Throughout my life, I've been like a class clown type of troublemaker." He then tells us that he moved down south to live with his grandmother because "my mother wanted a better life for me."[213] That's where he had run-ins with a teacher named

[211] Good for Tajah for not biting at my incredibly leading question (which I think is a perfect example of a rookie researcher mistake). She reminded me that storytelling is not always this profound, eye-opening process wherein you realize things you'd never realized before, although that's certainly possible. When we tell a story, our present self simultaneously reports and creates a past experience (Wanner, 1994; Butler, 2005; Kahneman, 2010), potentially leading to new revelations about that past experience.

[212] What a beautiful example of how stories can be honorary acts of witness.

[213] This is another new detail—with many stories behind it, I'm sure. I find it interesting that in all the times Alex ran this story, he never once mentioned why he was down south living with his grandmother. Maybe he didn't feel like saying why until now (and even now, his not giving us any details about it may be evidence of his not wanting to talk about it, which is fine).

Ms. Johnson. "She was crazy rude and disrespectful." One day they got into an argument after she told him to shut up, which ended in Alex's getting suspended. A few months later, he was asked to give a speech at eighth grade graduation. He didn't take it seriously at first, but his grandmother did. She took his phone and forbade him from watching TV until he wrote it. Then she and his English teacher proofread it for him. The day before graduation, he got a nice haircut and a "Looney Tunes tie." He was excited, despite the fact that his mother wasn't going to be able to make it down from New York. When he walked into the auditorium the day of the speech, he thought he saw her out of the corner of his eye, but "[he] was like, 'Naw.'" But then he heard, "Hey, Mocha!" ("My mother calls me Mocha.")[214] And he said, "Oooooh!" She pulled out a camera, which made him even more nervous than he already was. After his speech, he got a standing ovation. A college basketball scout approached him and complimented him. Afterward, his mother took him out to dinner. "She put her hand on my shoulder, and then she looked at me and said, 'I'm very proud of you.' She made me tear up a little bit, 'cause a college rep came up to me, y'know, stuff like that, but comin' from my mother, like—that's my idol right there. I really love her to death. She's the most important person in my life. I'd really do anything for my mother. It's no question about that. So comin' from her, it was so nice.[215] I was like 'Sniff. Ma, chill, chill, chill. We in public.'" Later on that week, he asked one of his teachers how it came to be that he was chosen to give that speech. It turns out that it was Ms. Johnson who had nominated him. He ends his story with his own 'memorable moment': "Even though you are a

[214] Another new—and utterly heartwarming—detail! I love it.

[215] I'd never heard Alex say these things about his mom in any previous runs of this story. In the moment, it seemed as if he might be realizing these things as he was saying them, but when I asked him whether that was the case in our focus group interview, he said no (see footnote [219]).

troublemaker or a class clown doesn't mean you can't show people your true colors. There's more to you. If you have a chance to show somebody that, show 'em that. Take it seriously."[216]

* * *

After the performances, Alex, Tajah, and I walked down the hall for a focus group interview. My first question was how they would describe the storytelling unit to someone who wasn't there. When Tajah said it "opened [her] up a lot," I asked what caused that shift (as she had said she originally wanted nothing to do with it).

After her answer, Alex said, "I didn't have no problem with sharing. I just didn't want to, 'cause the only two people I trust in that classroom is Tajah and Terrain, 'cause they don't really go out there and tell my business to other people. And I ain't know nobody else, and I ain't trust 'em. I mean, I know not to trust *everybody*, but it allowed me to give some people a chance to be trustworthy. I just gained more trust for people in that classroom. And they didn't go outside the classroom and say anything, so I felt like I just built more trust for people—in general, not just the people in that classroom. Give people a chance, y'know?"[217]

When I asked what their responses and reactions to the unit were, starting with the first day, Alex said, "At first, I didn't care, but as it went on, I got kinda excited about Story Shop in the morning. Just to hear stories—for people to tell they stories. 'Cause I like hearing stories, instead of learning all day.[218]

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[216] It really sounded as if he was talking not just about, but *to* his younger self right there at the end. If narrative is how identities are constructed and defined (Wortham, 2001; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Currie, 1998; Bruner, 2002), then our stories construct both our former selves and our current selves.

[217] Storytelling units can lead to positive attitude shifts in our students—one of the most valuable being the building of trust where it may not have existed before. Alex seems to be an example of this.

[218] Storytelling units can get students excited about school (though I do find it incredibly interesting that he contrasts hearing stories with 'learning').

I also asked if any of the things they said during their stories were realizations that had come to them during the telling, or if they were all things that they had already known and just wanted to communicate to others. Alex says, "I'm about to say no, 'cause I wrote down some stuff, but I didn't really practice on it or do anything."[219]

When I asked them how they ended up choosing their stories, Alex said, "To be honest, I was gonna tell a story about my best friend, Aryin, but I didn't wanna get emotional, 'cause that was like my brother…I can't talk about it, so that's why I didn't wanna choose a story like that. So I'm like, 'I'm gonna choose an uplifting story for me.' It doesn't always have to be sad. And then I made people laugh…I didn't wanna tell it [the Aryin story], because I can't even go to his parents' house. I can't. 'Cause if I go—even before he passed away, they had so many pictures of him. All his house is filled with pictures of the whole family and him. It's too painful."[220]

The topic of painful stories also came up in my interview with Ms. Garcia. She said, "I think sometimes with the story that they choose, sometimes a lot of emotions come up, and it roadblocks, and they don't wanna talk about it anymore. Like they talk about it once, and then they're like, 'I don't wanna do that anymore.' And so we have to give them that space, that freedom. Say, 'You know what? If it's still too close, if you haven't healed from it, then it's probably not the right story to tell for now, so maybe we can pick a different one.' But it's interesting to see how they deal with that. Sometimes, they're like, 'Yeah, okay, I will' and

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[219] Like Tajah (see footnote [211] in her strand), Alex didn't bite on this incredibly leading question; storytelling isn't always a process wherein you realize things you never realized before. 'Big stories' like the one Alex told involve events that significantly shaped the teller's life (Freeman, 2007). Perhaps a lot of processing has been done about those big events already. (Though, to be fair, I'm not sure Alex completely understood my question—*practicing* a story isn't necessarily what leads to realizations. I should have followed up on this, but I didn't.)

[220] Some stories can be too painful to tell, and it's never good to push. (As The Story Shop instructors like to say, we should tell stories from our scars, not our wounds.) The process of capturing traumatic experiences in narrative form can be healing, but it is dependent on a safe space and fully attentive witnesses (Laub, 1992; Jelin, 2002; Shuman, 2005). Students should not be telling stories that they don't feel ready to tell. We have to respect those boundaries (for more on this, see footnotes [27-32] of Chapter 4).

sometimes they're like, 'No. I'm okay.' A week goes by, and something about just telling it that one time can be very therapeutic. Not that we're seeking that. We're not claiming to be therapists or anything, but in some ways it helps them kind of reconcile it a little bit, and suddenly they want to tell it again…That's what I see."[221]

Dina, Part IV: "You have to tell somebody."

The day of Dina's performance arrives. She strides confidently up to the stage and turns her face toward the bright lights. She opens by telling the class that she was very shy in middle school and had a hard time making friends until she clicked with a girl named Cyndi. She eventually figured out that Cyndi was getting bullied when Dina and she were walking together to the bus stop and a big girl ran up and choked Dina with the crook of her elbow while a larger group surrounded them. Dina broke free and she and Cyndi ran to the school for help, but the bullies were gone by the time they returned with a teacher. Dina decided that she couldn't be friends with Cyndi anymore, but they could be "secret friends." Then Dina and her family moved. "Peace, Cyndi," Dina tells us that she had thought at the time. "I'm not here anymore. I don't have to deal with this bullying anymore." When she returned to her former school to take a test a few weeks later, Cyndi was bruised and battered. "I didn't want to look at her anymore, because it just was so painful." Dina walked up to her to say hi, and Cyndi said, "I hate you. We're not friends anymore." When Dina started at her new school, "karma decided to stomp on my face like a bee. She was there like, 'Hey, now it's your turn. You're gonna get bullied for no reason, like Cyndi was.' And when I realized how bad bullying is and how much it hurt to be bullied, I started to regret everything that I did to Cyndi. I wasn't the one who bullied her, but I

[221] Telling a painful story can feel therapeutic, but teachers must be sensitive to whether or not students are ready to tell their painful stories. It can sometimes be difficult for our students to see—much less seriously consider—the potentially long-term effects of publicly telling a painful story (Winn & Ubiles, 2011). For more on this, see footnote [83] of Chapter 4.

wasn't the one who stopped the bullying either, and that was also a big problem. And to this day, I regret not standing up for her the way I should have. And if I were to go back in time with the knowledge that I know now, I would do things completely differently, and I would stand up for her like a good friend should."

* * *

After Dina's performance, when she, Tanissa, and I were walking down the hallway toward our focus group interview room, I said, "That was awesome. How'd that feel?"

"It felt *good*."

"Yeah, she got intense there at the end," Tanissa said. [222]

When we got to the room and sat down, Dina continued: "I don't get nervous. But while I was up there, I actually felt really good. Telling the story, I started to think back about how I felt in that point in time, and I think it helped the story more."

"That's something big for you," Tanissa said. "So talking about it again, you relive it for the first time to the fullest, and in front of people, it just makes it that much more emotional."[223]

I asked Dina if she agreed.

"Yeah. I started closing my eyes, and I started to imagine what happened. I don't know why, but it felt like I went back in time and I was just there, and I was my own conscience, and I'm like, 'Why am I doing this?'"[224]

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[222] Ninety percent of Dina's final story ran exactly as she had practiced it with us. It felt tight and well-rehearsed. But when she got to the end—starting with the moment in which she compares herself to a bee being stomped on by karma's personified foot, all of which was brand new figurative language—the story started to sound more natural and more emotionally charged. Tanissa noticed it too. When we tell a story, our present self simultaneously reports and creates a past experience (Wanner, 1994; Butler, 2005; Kahneman, 2010), and Dina seemed to be reliving those moments *as* she was narrating them. (In fact, Dina later claims that that was exactly what was happening—see footnote [224].)

[223] I can say that my own storytelling experience supports Tanissa's observation here, as does Berkowitz's (2011) claim that the power of the audience is increased when its members are people the storyteller already knows.

When I asked Tanissa and Dina how they felt the whole Story Shop process went, how they would describe it to someone who wasn't there, Dina said, "I would say that the Story Shop is a group that helps you relive your past and even helps you figure out why you might have done these things. They help you relive the story that you're gonna tell, but also relive it in a way that you can explain it, and you can work out exactly how you felt and kinda present those feelings to others."[225]

After Tanissa told me and Dina that she saw storytelling as a way to disentangle painful thoughts,[226] I asked Dina if she agreed.

"For me, it's more like a weight off my shoulders—to tell somebody that this was a thing that happened. 'Cause people don't like to talk about things that hurt them, 'cause it hurts. Those emotions, they're painful, and you just don't wanna think about them because you might cry, but crying is another way to let something out and let something go, and to relive that emotion is to lift that weight off your shoulders…I got to tell somebody this story that's been weighing me down for years."[227]

Dina continued: "It [your story] is what made you who you are, so you have to tell somebody, to explain the things that you do now…It's like, 'Oh, *that's* why I kinda have trust

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[224] Storytelling can mentally transport us back in time to reevaluate our own choices and their effects. 'Big stories' involve those events that have significantly shaped our lives (Freeman, 2007), and Dina's relationship with Cyndi is clearly an example of that. While a story can never completely capture an event—much less a life (Butler, 2005; Tonkin, 1992; Shuman, 2005)—it can allow its teller to do some real and valuable processing (Flukernik, 1996).

[225] Dina agrees with Schank (1990) that crafting stories can help you make sense of your past and learn from it.

[226] For more on this, see pg. 156 of Tanissa's strand.

[227] Weight being lifted off the storyteller's shoulders is a great metaphor. When we tell a painful story, it can feel like we're taking some of its power over us away (van der Kolk & van der Hart, 1995; Plumwood, 2000); it can be freeing. Again, stories have the capacity to heal (McCaleb, 2003; Charon, 2007; Ramírez-Esparza & Pennebaker, 2007), but this process is by no means guaranteed, and it is completely dependent on an established safe space and fully attentive witnesses (Laub, 1992; Jelin, 2002; Shuman, 2005).

problems, and I only trust certain people, and with certain things, and I stick up for those people that I really do trust."

I ask Dina if telling that story is what helped her figure that out.

"Yeah, 'cause I always knew I had trust issues, I just never knew why. It's because I'm afraid I'm gonna find somebody who's gonna do the exact same thing to me."[228]

The next week, in my interview with Ms. Garcia, she said something that reminded me of Dina: "By the end of the semester, students are sharing their stories in a really beautiful, articulate way. Y'know, starting off with, 'This is how I was in the beginning, these are the things that happened to me, this is how I changed, this is now how I see the world or how I see my relationship or how I see myself.' And I'm always floored by their stories and how beautifully they're able to put them together."[229]

Tanissa, Part IV: "It was always a story that I've had to tell."

When I sat down with Tanissa and Dina for our focus group interview, one of the first things we talked about was how telling stories sometimes transports us back in time (as Dina had said that she felt her story took her back to seventh grade). When I asked them why they think that happens, Tanissa said, "I think it has to do with the fact that stories are a little personal. And especially this. This was kind of big. We were leading up to it for a few weeks, so people were bound to choose a story that was big to you and emotionally significant, so odds are it's gonna

[228] Storytelling can help us understand how our current behavior is shaped by our past (Flukernik, 1996). In my interview with Ms. Garcia, she brought up another example of a student doing the internal work that Dina seems to be describing here—Nyeia: "The fact that this [the events in Nyeia's story] happened a long time ago, but yet she's just finally letting go of it and talking about it and talking about the details—I think that's important for her. And for me, I thought it was interesting to see her work that out. She's a senior. Eighteen years old. That happened when she was twelve or thirteen." (For more on Nyiea, see pgs. 99-100 of Chapter 4.)

[229] Crafted stories can give cohesion to a series of events, which are sequenced so that they serve a purpose in the shaping of a life. Despite their subjectivity, stories can convey a true understanding of one person's experience (Shuman, 2004; Spence, 1982; Eakin, 2008; Zinsser, 1998; Holstein & Gubrium, 2012; Bell, 2010).

end up being something that you don't talk about on a day to day basis. Like my story, I haven't spoken to anyone really about it, so it's kinda powerful."[230]

I ask Tanissa if she experienced something similar to Dina's 'time travel' moment when she told her story to a new small group. She answered, "I think it's that the climax—the part where my father's beating her—it's just difficult to put something like that into words. Not necessarily because it's painful (it is) but just because it's a situation unique all on its own, so it's hard to describe how it is to be in the moment and that's happening in front of you. It's more something that you experience…I think that kinda helps the audience really see the severity of what you're saying—if it affects you to that point where you can't really talk about it anymore; you become inarticulate."[231]

When I asked them how they felt the whole process went, how they would describe it to someone who wasn't there, Tanissa said, "It gives voice to something that you didn't really have a voice for before."

I asked her to explain.

"When you go to a random person and you say, 'What stories do you have?' there are stories that pop up immediately, stories on the surface that are obvious to you, but then there are stories underneath that I guess you didn't really think were significant before. I think Story Shop teaches you that everything that happens to you is significant, even in the smallest way."[232]

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[230] Perhaps the length, intensity, and depth of the Story Shop process allows some students to choose and work on the stories that really matter to them. Since telling stories about formative events can allow our students to interpret those events through the lens of present concerns (Flukernik, 1996), setting aside the time and space for them to craft and share those stories feels like a worthy use of class time.

[231] Tanissa has a strong argument here for the importance of the unspeakable in storytelling. Sometimes silences and stumbles can shape a story as much as the words can. Perhaps it's precisely our inability to limn the power of certain experiences that ends up doing the limning for us (see footnotes [163] and [197]).

[232] Crafting stories can help you identify the events that have significantly shaped you, give those events meaning (Rosen & Rosen, 1988), and allow you to learn from them (Schank, 1990).

When I asked if there was a specific point when they decided to choose the stories they ended up telling, Tanissa said, "I think that it was always a story that I've had to tell, ever since it happened, 'cause I hadn't really told it yet. When you said to the class, 'They don't all have to be heavy stories,' I thought well, that means that they *can* be heavy, and that there's no problem with them being heavy, and if I can get the story out now, then why not?"[233]

I asked her to explain how it could be a good thing for her to tell that painful story when she had told me earlier that telling a story can force the storyteller to relive the experience[234]—how could reliving such a bad experience possibly be a good thing?

"I think it's because the painful things that happen in our lives are the ones that we feel the most emotions about, and our emotions tend to get jumbled and confused and twisted, because we have a lot of them, and they don't know what to do with each other, so they just kinda—they're like vines, and they tangle in each other and then just freeze. And it's mostly with painful things that that happens, and if you don't talk about them, they're just there, and whenever you think back on that, you're always just thinking, 'I don't really know what happened. I don't know how I felt about that.' So when you take that painful thing and you tell a story about it, it's kind of like taking the vines and untangling them and laying them out, so that not only does it make sense to everyone else, but in the process, it's making more sense to you, and it gives your life more order that way. So it does help, telling something painful."[235]

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[233] Tanissa reminds us that some of our students might already have stories that they're just waiting for the chance to share with us. She also reminds us of the importance of showing students a range of example stories. Perhaps it was the heaviness/intensity of some of our teacher stories—see pgs. 59-69 of Chapter 4—that allowed Tanissa to feel comfortable telling a 'heavy' story of her own.

[234] See pg. 152 in Dina's strand for this quote.

[235] At seventeen years old, Tanissa was able to come up with one of the most beautiful metaphors I've ever heard about storytelling's potential processing/healing power (van der Kolk & van der Hart, 1995; Plumwood, 2000; McCaleb, 2003; Charon, 2007; Ramírez-Esparza & Pennebaker, 2007).

Later in the focus group interview, after Dina described telling her story as "a weight off [her] shoulders[236], Tanissa said, "I see what you mean. It's kinda like walking around with a story you haven't told yet—sometimes I feel things that are important to you that no one knows about and they're kinda painful, sometimes you can feel like you're walking through a crowd and everyone looks at you and they *know* it. But they *don't* know it. It makes you feel vulnerable having something painful like that that you haven't told yet. Just 'cause it's still a fresh wound, since you haven't healed it yet, 'cause you haven't told anyone about it.[237] When people say, 'Oh, do you wanna talk about it?' it's a really clichéd thing to say, but it really helps, so I see what you mean by a weight lifting off your shoulders. It sounds weird, but I don't have to worry about it anymore, because someone knows about it. It's not a secret anymore."[238]

I asked Tanissa if her story helped her figure anything out. "Yeah. And this is kinda personal, again, but I can say it. Just the fact that after my story happened, I naturally see my father very differently…I never saw him the same. There was always that much more fear than before…It took away some of the respect I had for him, and my parents started to notice it…I knew why I was upset at him, but it always bothered me—why *exactly* was I upset at him? And in what way was I mad? And to what extent was I upset at him? And telling it [the story] really made me realize that it's okay to be upset at him, because what he did really was that bad."[239]

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[236] See pg. 153 of Dina's strand for this quote.

[237] This statement is quite interesting in relation to The Story Shop's "tell stories from your scars, not your wounds" maxim (see footnote [220] in Alex's strand). Perhaps telling a story is part of what transforms a wound into a scar.

[238] It seems that Tanissa feels like 'releasing' a story into the world means you no longer carry the burden of being the only one who knows it and are therefore on some level freed. This might be true for her and not for others, however. There are, after all, potential consequences of 'releasing' a story and therefore losing power over it (Bal, 2009; Rosen & Rosen, 1988; Frank, 2012). Perhaps this risk is increased when the story is a painful one (see footnote [83] of Chapter 4).

[239] Storytelling can help us understand how our current feelings, behavior, and personae are shaped by past events (Gilmore, 2001; Romano, 1995; Bauman, 1986; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Polletta, 2012). What kind of daughter

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In my interview with Ms. Garcia, she told me that Tanissa lives in a shelter right now and that one of her brothers is autistic. "Sometimes she sleeps at friends' houses," she went on. She then told me that Tanissa has come to school with a bag of laundry before and had to carry it around with her all day.[240] "It's one of those things, especially with our population—our kids have been through so much. They have faced so much adversity that they're sometimes so wise beyond their years and have unfortunately seen too much, but they so desperately need to tell someone and need someone to hear them. They just need to be recognized—that that happened, and I'm sorry. They need it so badly that I find that even if they are a bit hesitant at the beginning, they do, they just want it…They need people to know them, they want people to know them, but yet their trust has been so jeopardized and hurt that they just don't know how to have that friend to let it out, so a lot of times, this is huge for them. To be able to say that about themselves in front of people. It's just so important. It really changes them in a big way."[241]

I asked Ms. Garcia why she thinks storytelling is so important for her students.

"Because when you have a loving home, you have somebody that says, 'I know you,' who says, 'I know you' every day, by the lunch they make for you, or the way they're able to hug you the right way. We have that need to be known by somebody. And when your home life is so broken, and you're tossed from aunt to uncle to grandparent, mom's in jail, mom's out of jail, mom's on drugs, mom's off drugs, don't even know your mom, don't even know your dad,

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does Tanissa see herself as? What kind of daughter does she want to be? Perhaps telling stories about her constantly shifting relationship with her parents will help her answer these questions for herself.

[240] This is heartbreaking. Tanissa never told me this, and she certainly had no obligation to. Students should have the right to decide what their teachers know and don't know about them—the right to tell their own stories (Shuman, 1986; Adichie, 2009; Bell, 2010)—but they so rarely do in school. Tanissa apparently didn't want her homelessness to be a part of her story with me and/or our small group, and that's okay. (I didn't ask, but I do wonder if Ms. Garcia found this out from Tanissa herself or from someone else at the school.)

[241] Ms. Garcia clearly believes in the importance of storytelling in her classroom (for more on this, see footnote [243]).

you're in foster care, you're in a shelter—and that's not one story, that's most of their stories. I mean, I would say it's rare to have a student who comes from a home where they just have both parents living there in a functional relationship, a loving relationship, where they communicate.[242] So that *need* to be known, it's so desperate. And that's why I think even if it's a small story, it's that little window, and they need someone to just see them, even if they can only show you this little shoulder. If you can see it, they can breathe a little easier.[243]

"Sometimes they don't have anybody to listen to them," she continued. "They go home, and there's no one there, or they go home and they shut themselves off from their crazy, loud, fighting, dysfunctional situation…When you're just struggling to survive, it's just hard when you come to school. It's hard to do your homework. But when there's a place like storytelling, where you get to at least share it and say, 'Life really sucks right now,' or 'I'm really angry right now,' or 'I'm really sad right now,' or occasionally when they're really happy, at least they can share it with somebody—they have a place they get to do it."[244]

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[242] I want to honor Ms. Garcia's perception here, but I also have to note that some of her language reminds me of the cultural deficit model that sometimes pervades public discourse on urban education (Gorski, 2006; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Though I agree with her that storytelling units can offer students a place to feel listened to and that that is an incredibly important potential benefit of storytelling in the classroom, we must be careful not to see storytelling as some kind of magic salve we can apply to ameliorate the woes of being a poor student of color.

[243] Despite their subjectivity, stories can convey a true understanding of one person's experience (Shuman, 2004; Spence, 1982; Eakin, 2008; Zinsser, 1998; Holstein & Gubrium, 2012), and sharing personal stories can create and strengthen social bonds (Eakin, 2008; Pennebaker, 1990; Dotinga, 2012; Johnson & Freedman, 2001), which surely makes storytelling a worthwhile use of class time.

[244] Ms. Garcia reminds us that storytelling units can offer students a place to vent and share both their frustrations and their successes. They can also address the universal human need to feel heard/known, though this process is dependent on a safe space and fully attentive witnesses (Laub, 1992; Jelin, 2002; Shuman, 2005). Is it fair to say that students in Title I urban public high schools like Ms. Garcia's need/benefit from storytelling units more than students in wealthier schools do/would? Perhaps. It seems as if Ms. Garcia might argue that. It's certainly probable that students in wealthier, whiter school districts get more opportunities to participate in activities like this than Title I urban public school students of color do (Anyon, 2009).

Connecting the Strands

Looking at these four students' journeys side by side, some commonalities and some differences emerge for me. First, Tanissa was the only one who was excited about this unit from the get-go (Dina was "disappointed" at first, Alex said, "At first, I didn't care," and Tajah said that she originally thought she "wasn't gonna do none of it"), but all four students spoke positively of their experiences at the end. Dina said, "I got to tell somebody this story that's been weighing me down for years," Tanissa said, "It gives voice to something that you didn't really have a voice for before," Alex said, "I just gained more trust for people in that classroom," and Tajah said, "It made a big impact on my life." Sometimes it takes time to build student buy-in to a storytelling unit, but certain storytelling activities do seem to get students more interested—teacher stories in particular, I think. Three of the four students in my small group raised their hands to respond to my middle school bullying story (Tajah: "If you was to see him today, what would you do?" Alex: "I wanted to fight that dude," and Tanissa: "He thought he was so much harder than he was"), and both Tajah and Alex spoke of our teacher stories as major turnaround points for them in this unit. There were dips along the way, of course (students walking into class in bad moods, students being tired, lazy with feedback, absent, etc.), but by our fifth visit, it seemed as if almost everyone was bought in to what we were doing.

Though not everyone chose to share a family story in the final performances, all four students in my small group shared stories of family throughout the unit—without my ever specifically asking them to. Dina spoke of her parents' tendency to be controlling, Tanissa gave us examples of how strong her relationship with her mother is, Tajah shared the impact that her mother and her sister have had on her, and Alex told us about losing a cousin to violence. They also all four shared stories about friends at certain points in the unit. Dina talked a lot about

Cyndi, Tanissa told a story about a rebellious high school friend, Alex told us about a friend he almost got into a fight with, and Tajah spoke of losing her friend Aryin. Of course, their sharing about family and friends makes sense when you consider that these two categories are generally some of the firsts to come up when people talk about the most significant events and relationships in their lives. But their sharing about these formative relationships may seem more important when you consider that this might be one of the few times in school that these four students have had the opportunity to process the significant roles that these family members and friends have played in their lives. It is interesting to note, however, how varied the level of detail and intimacy were in these stories. Some were just quick anecdotes shared in small groups, while others were crafted and shared in final performances. I wonder why it is that some students are more willing to share stories about friends than stories about family (and vice versa). There are so many factors that go into the decision to share; my focus group interview questions barely scratched the surface.

Though all four students in my small group showed signs of verbal processing throughout the unit (e.g., Alex: "I used to be very rude; I just noticed that," Tajah: "She's the key to us," Tanissa: "I don't want to say I felt alone, but I felt alone," and Dina: "I wasn't the one who bullied her, but I wasn't the one who stopped the bullying either"), in our focus group interviews, both Alex and Tajah told me that they didn't really feel like the storytelling process helped them realize anything new. Dina and Tanissa, on the other hand, both said that they felt it definitely did. Dina said, "You can work out exactly how you felt and kinda present those feelings to others," and Tanissa said, "When you take that painful thing and you tell a story about it, it's kind of like taking the vines and untangling them and laying them out, so that not only does it make sense to everyone else, but in the process, it's making more sense to you."

I saw all four students in my small group exhibit leadership during this unit. Alex became known as 'the king of memorable moments,' Dina was the first student to volunteer to share a story with the whole class, Tanissa raised her hand to offer reactions and/or feedback to every single story she heard, and Tajah chose to share her final story with everyone despite hardly ever speaking in class. According to Ms. Garcia, Tanissa was the only one whom she already considered a leader before we came in, meaning Dina, Alex, and Tajah all took on new leadership roles during this unit. Of course, I cannot point to any particular thing we did to inspire, invite, and/or encourage these examples of leadership. If I could, it would be helpful in developing strategies for fostering student leadership outside of storytelling units.

An important difference to note is that while Alex felt closer to Ms. Garcia after this unit ("y'all helped out in the fact that me and her, y'know, our relationship grew, teacher to student"), Dina, Tanissa, and Tajah all told me that they did not. I see this as evidence that The Story Shop needs to do a better job at making sure that the classroom teachers in our workshops are integrally—and publicly—a part of both the curriculum planning and the teaching of a storytelling unit.[245]

Lastly, throughout this unit, each student in my small group offered up stories that countered the different assumptions I had made about them in our first few visits. I had assumed that Tajah was a troublemaker who hated writing, that Alex was a class clown who didn't take school seriously, that Dina was withdrawn and reluctant to share, and that Tanissa would be comfortable talking about anything in front of the whole class. All four of them proved me wrong on these things, for which I am grateful. Apparently, even someone who considers herself in active battle against preconceived notions can be susceptible to them. Storytelling units can be just as eye-opening for teachers as they can be for students.

[245] For more on this, see pgs. 165-166 of Chapter 6.

Chapter 6: The Power of Speaking

In addition to being a space to gather the many encouragements, warnings, and lessons that have emerged for me throughout this work, this final chapter is also, at heart, a call to do *teaching* differently—to honor the experiences and skills an oral storytelling unit can offer as just as important as those more traditionally found in English classrooms, and to treat our students' stories as the potentially rich natural resources they are.

With the best of intentions, administrators may push back on the idea of devoting a significant amount of class time to a unit that doesn't seem to directly prepare students for college and/or standardized tests. How could a teacher convince such an administrator that this work is important enough to justify the time and effort required to do it well? Below are all of the encouraging things that this research has taught me about why oral storytelling units matter, each tempered by the important warnings that have also emerged from this work. The potential power of public, personal storytelling is—like most powerful things—double-edged and not to be taken lightly. Storytelling devotees like myself can become blind to the idea that what we think and feel about storytelling may not be true for everyone. Those who do this work should keep a constant and critical eye on the assumptions and preconceived notions behind actions that could potentially make students feel uncomfortable, pressured, or even unsafe.

Speaking Classroom Relationships

First, this work has reinforced my belief in the importance of teacher stories. It has shown that some students are more trusting and willing to open up if they see their teacher doing the same. In our focus group interview, Tajah said, "When you and the other ladies, when you told your personal stories, I thought, a'ight…if y'all can do that, then I can do that too. I just gotta be

mature about it." And Alex said, "I didn't really care, to be honest, until deeper into the semester, where people started telling they personal stories…I'm like, 'Alright. I guess I can trust these people in this class.'" Sharing a personal story with your students can potentially lead to their feeling closer to you. In our focus group interview, Alex said, "Story Shop made me like Ms. Garcia more. Probably because she shared her own story, and if y'all didn't come this year, she probably wouldn't have did that, so y'all helped out in the fact that me and her, y'know, our relationship grew, teacher to student." Telling a story can also endear you to your students, perhaps even increasing your own investment in the class, which I noticed happening to me while I listened to students respectfully discuss the middle school bullying story I had just shared with them. Through sharing that story, I gained the positive feelings of connection that can sometimes come from sharing a personal experience with students (even if/when that experience was a negative one). Lastly, I have learned that if you ask your students to keep a space sacred, they just might. As Alex said in our focus group interview (regarding the sensitive story Linda had told the class), "Nobody went outside. We never talked about it. We talked about it in the classroom, but when we left that classroom, nobody talked about it in school. Like, it didn't come up in our everyday conversation *ever*."

It's important to recognize, however, that sometimes—instead of serving as encouraging models—teacher stories can intimidate and/or discourage students. In our focus group interview, Tanissa said, "I remember when you first started performing to us, I'm like, 'They make it seem so easy.'…I'm just sitting here like, 'Wow. What do they expect me to do the first time I go up there?'" And Dina said, "Let's say you're going onstage, and the best singer in the world goes onstage before you. You're like, 'Nope!'" Tanissa and Dina's point of view must be considered when deciding whether or not to share our stories with students. We must also consider the fact

that in telling a teacher story, there are, of course, the same dangers inherent in anyone's sharing of personal information: the chance that you'll feel more vulnerable than you thought you would, the chance that you won't feel truly heard or understood, and the chance that the sensitive information you share with students will later be used as weapons against you. Though neither the classroom teacher nor the visiting storytelling instructors in this workshop seemed to experience any of those dangers, there was certainly a chance that we would.

Speaking of visiting instructors, it is important for Story Shop (and other educational non-profits) to realize that bringing new people into a classroom can sometimes threaten any sense of safe space that may have already been built up by the classroom teacher and his/her students. In our focus group interview, Dina said, "I'm not okay with new people coming into my classroom, so when you guys came in, I'm like, 'Whoa, why are they steppin' into my classroom right now? Who are these people?'" As such, I would advise a team of storytelling instructors to only enter a classroom if the classroom teacher has first introduced and discussed the idea with his/her students beforehand. It might be even better to leave the decision of whether or not to bring Story Shop in to a student vote; their having weighed in on the matter might increase excitement and buy-in before we even arrive (or, just as important, keep us from forcing our program on to a group of students who don't want it). Another warning that has emerged from doing this kind of push-in work is that if the teacher is not the one doing most of the direct work with students, it can make them feel as if (s)he was not really involved. In our focus group interview, Tanissa said, "I kind of see Ms. Garcia as neutral, even afterwards…When the Story Shop came in, I kind of saw it as a relationship between us and the Story Shop," and Dina agreed. In my interview with Ms. Garcia, she said, "Sometimes the kids feel freer because they know you're gonna leave the school, and you're not connected to the school." Story Shop can do

a better job at more meaningfully collaborating with classroom teachers to truly co-teach/lead these workshops.

Throughout this research process, I have seen the power that storytelling units have to shape interpersonal relationships. When students share their stories, it allows their classmates and their teacher to learn more about them, which can help those people understand (and potentially connect with) them more. When I asked Ms. Garcia what she thought when she heard Tajah's story, she said, "It made me understand her more, as a teacher. And I feel like that's one of the things—I feel lucky that I get to teach this class. I know things about these students that other teachers don't. I understand these students in a way that other teachers don't." Storytelling units can also give students the chance to stand up for one another. When Tajah told Alex he "look[ed] like a dickhead," Dina said, "That's not true." And when Tajah said Dina was "grimy" for "dipp[ing]" on her friend, Alex said, "She ain't dip. I mean, she couldn't defend herself. Look how tiny she is. I'm sayin', you gotta understand the type of person she is. She's not a conflict person, so I understand where she comin' from. I'm the type of person that's gonna fight you. She's not that type of person, you gotta understand." I have seen students who don't usually interact feel more connected to one another and even respect each other more after being put in the same small group. In our focus group interview, Dina said, "I didn't really talk to [Tajah]. But her story was, I feel like it touched me. I almost cried during her story, when she was running it through the first time." And Alex said, "The storytelling thing helped us [him, Tanissa, and Dina] be better friends…When I first came to this school, and I seen Dina, I was like, 'Yo, somethin's wrong with that girl'… And then when Tanissa first came, like, she's pretty, but she's smart, so she comes off as a know-it-all type snotty person…As we went on, I started

noticin' that me and Dina, we gave each other nicknames and stuff like that, and me and Tanissa could actually have a normal conversation—not only about classwork. Like, we were friends."

This storytelling unit connected students who might never have connected otherwise. In my interview with Ms. Garcia, she told me that before our final performances, Tajah and Nyeia had never exchanged a single word as far as she knew, yet Tajah responded to Nyeia's story with, "You can't let that rule your life. You're so awesome. That was a long time ago. You're an amazing person. You can't let that girl have that power over you anymore. You can't live like that." This storytelling unit also revealed to students that their classmates have experienced similar successes, failures, and losses to their own, possibly leading to deeper connections between them. In our focus group interview, Tajah said, "With Tanissa's story—my mother and my father used to argue a lot…I could connect to her story, and I know how she felt, so it was like bein' that we had that connection, 'cause her parents been through somethin' that my parents been through." After hearing Jessica's story, Angelica said, "I can relate, 'cause I'm the type, I have friends who aren't necessarily good people." And after hearing Tanissa's story, Jessica said, "I just…I connected." I even saw such revelations occur between old friends. In our focus group interview, Dina told me that despite the fact that she knew Nyeia well, the bullying story that Nyeia shared was brand new to her.

There is also, of course, the risk that storytelling's ability to shape relationships will take a negative turn. When teachers and students trust each other enough to start sharing their personal stories, they open themselves up to potential betrayals of that trust. When Tanissa shared a story with our group about not letting her classmates cheat off of her anymore, Tajah said, "I would beat you up. That's grimy." Sensitive stories can even be used as weapons against their tellers, which is why it's sometimes easier to tell a story to a room full of strangers than it is

to tell it to a group of people you know you're going to keep seeing five days a week. With the latter, there is a chance that the things you reveal will someday be used against you. Because of that risk, there is always the possibility that a storytelling unit will further or even create divisions between our students. There's no way of knowing, for example, whether the sensitive story Angelica shared with the class about being raped will ever be used against her through gossip or even direct attacks. Sharing vulnerable stories can also open our students up to hurt in the moment, if their classmates don't take them well. When Dina first shared her story about abandoning her friend, Tajah said, "I ain't never goin' nowhere witchu by myself." We can't guarantee that every opportunity we give our students to support each other will be taken. And sometimes the empathy we see a story provoke ends up being just an ephemeral emotional response with little or no abiding concern beneath it. For example, though Alex originally stood up for Dina when Tajah accused her of 'dipping,' he then poked fun at her for awkwardly using slang when she ran the same story later. ("'Beef?' Yo, Dina's a thug.") Sometimes the stories students share only serve to reinforce previous assumptions they had about each other. While telling a sensitive story to the class, Terrain referred to locking himself in a closet out of depression, and Dylan and Michael made eye contact and smiled as if he had just admitted something they assume he denies. Lastly, the identities expressed in our students' stories are not always ones we're happy to see. When Alex told us about running his fist through a window—and then said that he still sometimes punches things out of anger—I'll admit that I was disappointed.

These three months also offered examples of stories' ability to shape one's opinions of others. The stories that came out of this unit offered multiple counternarratives to those I thought I already knew (see pg. 162 of Chapter 5) and allowed some students to expose new, pleasantly

surprising sides of themselves that their classmates had never seen before. In our focus group interview, Dina said, "Tajah was talking about her family, and I'm like, 'You chose a family story; that's really surprising.' 'Cause usually the quieter people choose, like, school stories and stories that don't really hurt them in a way. And I was like, 'Wow. It's a deep story.'" This should serve as a reminder of the importance of allowing students—especially those who might often be silenced—to speak for themselves. As I mention in Chapter 2, our society already has plenty of stories about urban teenagers, so few of which actually originate with the teenagers themselves. Hearing stories can dismantle initial assumptions, and it's so important for students (and us) to learn that there's probably more to the people in our classrooms than meets the eye. As Tanissa wisely pointed out in our focus group interview, "Hearing a story about [someone] brings you closer to them and kind of shapes your view of them. Even if not in a good or a bad way, you just know them better, and that's important in and of itself."

When Kyra told the class a story about being kicked when she was down, her audience of familiar faces reacted with "aww"s and "ugh"s that seemed to reveal an understanding of what was at stake in her story—an understanding almost certainly shaped by their previous knowledge of her. For despite their subjectivity, stories can convey a deep understanding of a person's own experience. Stories can also be honorary acts of witness for the important people in our lives, as exemplified by Tajah's story about her sister. When I asked her how she came to choose that particular story, she said, "I feel like she needed recognition. She needed to be known for that, for something that she did, 'cause what she did was a beautiful thing. She made our family stronger." Stories can also offer us and our students a way to pass on memories of the ones we've lost (as Tajah did with her story about her and Alex's friend Aryin), which can keep the departed alive in some way. Though sharing stories comes with no small amount of risk,

storytelling's ability to connect our students to each other—and to us—makes it such a worthwhile and important thing to do in school.

Speaking Identities

This work has also taught me a lot about stories' ability to shape the thoughts and opinions we have about ourselves and the important events and relationships in our lives. Telling a story about a person or event can allow you to identify and explore how you feel about that person or event, potentially leading to personal growth. I personally experienced this when, while listening to students talk about my middle school bullying story, I found myself realizing how much Cliff Landers still affects me even twenty years later. Tanissa seems to have experienced this as well: "Telling it [the story] really made me realize that it's okay to be upset at him [her dad], because what he did really was that bad." Telling stories about formative events can allow us to interpret those events through the lens of present-day concerns, potentially helping us realize their importance. In our focus group interview, Dina talked about what her story taught her about herself: "It [your story] is what made you who you are, so you have to tell somebody, to explain the things that you do now…It's like, 'Oh, *that's* why I kinda have trust problems, and I only trust certain people, and with certain things, and I stick up for those people that I really do trust.'" Telling stories about tough events can help us make sense of them, learn from them, and potentially feel better about them. In our focus group interview, Tanissa put it this way: "The painful things that happen in our lives are the ones that we feel the most emotions about, and our emotions tend to get jumbled and confused and twisted, because we have a lot of them, and they don't know what to do with each other, so they just kinda—they're like vines, and they tangle in each other and then just freeze…So when you take that painful thing and you tell a story about it, it's kind of like taking the vines and untangling them and laying them out, so

that not only does it make sense to everyone else, but in the process, it's making more sense to you." Tajah spoke of stories taking stress away, and Dina spoke of stories lifting weight off her shoulders. Whatever the events we choose to narrate, the very act of narrating them can grant coherence to their role in our lives. As Dina said in our focus group interview, "I always knew I had trust issues, I just never knew why. It's because I'm afraid I'm gonna find somebody who's gonna do the exact same thing to me."

Narration can also grant coherence to our relationships. If we *are* our stories, then the stories we tell about the relationships in our lives shape our perception of those relationships. On the very last run of his story, Alex added a new line that might have reflected some internal processing he had done around his relationship with his mother: "A college rep came up to me, y'know, stuff like that, but comin' from my mother, like—that's my idol right there. I really love her to death. She's the most important person in my life. I'd really do anything for my mother. It's no question about that." Our stories shape us as much as we shape our stories, so sometimes it's precisely through telling a story about something that we come to understand how we feel about it; part of the storytelling process is stepping back from the events and relationships of our lives and assessing their past and current impact on us. As Ms. Garcia said in our interview, "By the end of the semester, students are sharing their stories in a really beautiful, articulate way. Y'know, starting off with, 'This is how I was in the beginning, these are the things that happened to me, this is how I changed, this is now how I see the world or how I see my relationship or how I see myself.'" Of course, sometimes this 'stepping back' process can lead to our realizing less than comforting things about ourselves and/or the people in our stories—like Tanissa's realizing that what her dad did "really was that bad" or Dina's realizing that she "disowned" her friend at her greatest time of need.

Self-narration can also allow us to sift through all of our various personae and consciously define and project who we are at any given moment. Narrative is how identities are constructed and defined, so our stories construct both our former selves and our current selves. For example, Tajah's story constructed both her infant self (screaming when her mother tried to hold her) and her current self (a teenager who sometimes calls her sister "mommy"). A story can even be directed at a previous self, especially if you're reliving a moment as you're narrating it, which can sometimes lead to having real-time realizations about yourself and your past behavior. Dina spoke of reliving the events in her story during our focus group interview: "I started closing my eyes, and I started to imagine what happened. I don't know why, but it felt like I went back in time and I was just there, and I was my own conscience, and I'm like, 'Why am I doing this?'" Each telling of a story is different, so the more times we run it, the more we remember/revise/delete/add, which alters both our memories and our perceptions of the subjects within it. For example, in Tanissa's story, the "not a word" moment she shared with her mother before her dad's arrival went from being nonexistent (at least in the story) to being spoken to being a silent communication made entirely through eye contact.

Of course, this research has also offered up multiple warnings about the internal risks of doing this kind of work with students. The sharing of personal stories in the classroom is a high-stakes activity. First, there is the risk of having students share their stories before they're ready; they could share something that they haven't thoroughly processed yet, their sharing could lead to consequences that they have not yet fully considered, and/or your not knowing exactly what they're going to say could put the other students in the room at emotional risk. For example, I didn't know that Dina and Linda's stories were going to contain potentially triggering topics before they shared those stories with the entire class, and I should have. And when Angelica

shared her story about being raped, it didn't seem as if she could even get through it without Ms. Garcia's literally holding her hand. How could we have known that she was really ready to share that, or that she wouldn't regret doing so later? If a student tells a hard story and doesn't end up feeling truly heard, there's a possibility that talking about that painful experience will only serve to make it more painful. This might have happened to Angelica, whose post-survey showed a 23% drop in trust, and/or it might have happened to Terrain, who was nonverbally made fun of and constantly interrupted while telling his story and whose post-survey also showed a 20% drop in trust.

In our excitement and passion for this work, we can't forget that it has the potential to upset our students as much as it has the potential to hearten them. This warning applies to both the telling and the listening aspects of storytelling. What if listening to a story about abuse constitutes abuse to one of the students in the audience? What if it makes him/her think about or remember something (s)he doesn't want to? These are things to be considered before giving the stage to potentially triggering stories. Hearing their classmates' stories can be a painful process for students; it is even capable of reopening old wounds. This might have happened to Alethea, who Ms. Garcia said was "very emotional" and "had to leave the classroom" during Angelica's story, and/or Dina, who told me that Nyeia's story made her "[feel] so horrible." The fact that these workshops take place during school hours increases these risks in a way, as the students are basically 'trapped' in the room with us. While we take care to offer a Bill of Rights that technically allows them to opt out of anything that makes them uncomfortable, the fact that they are in a class that they have to attend (and for which they will receive a grade) complicates those rights in ways that must be acknowledged. So, again, sharing stories in the classroom comes with no small amount of risk. But it also allows students to position themselves as narrators of their

own lives—architects of their own becoming. And storytelling units might be one of the few times something like this happens in school.

Speaking Investment

It was encouraging for me to see in this work evidence of a storytelling unit increasing student investment. In my interview with Ms. Garcia, she spoke about the positive shifts she saw in her classroom after our storytelling unit: "I find that they do their work. And then they're mad at me if they don't all get to share…I think those who were there and are able to actually go through the process, they are more excited and willing to be there." Storytelling units can also offer students opportunities to become leaders, allowing ones who might not normally 'shine' to do so, potentially causing increased self-esteem and confidence. I saw this most notably in Dina and Alex. Ms. Garcia saw it too. She originally told me that Alex doesn't always perform well academically and finds it "easier to pretend to be cool." But after a few weeks of Alex's unique interpretation of what constitutes a 'memorable moment,' she suggested we start calling them 'Alex Moments.' Regarding Dina, she said, "[Dina] sometimes can be shunned from the other students as 'not cool,' so sometimes students think, 'Oh, she's weird' and don't wanna hang around her. But it was great because she really shined in our class, and students would be like, 'Oh, wow! Snaps for Dina!' and I just saw a little more confidence in the way she held herself."

Storytelling units can even get students who were initially resistant to the idea of sharing personal stories excited about the class. Tajah, who complained to the principal and asked to be transferred out of the class after our first visit, wrote this on Ms. Garcia's end of semester reflection sheet: "I enjoyed The Story Shop alot because it gave me courage." Tajah also told me in our focus group interview, "If [Story Shop] was a class to sign up, I would definitely encourage people to sign up for the class." Both Ms. Garcia and I also noticed significant,

positive behavioral shifts in Dylan after this unit. He had originally joined Tajah in complaining to the principal, but by the end of the unit, he was volunteering to tell his story in front of the entire class. (He ended up being absent the day of the performances, but Ms. Garcia said that was only because of the snowstorm: "He was so gung-ho about it. And I don't think that was fake.") Dylan came up in my interview with Ms. Garcia multiple times. At one point, she said, "Whether or not he wants to admit it, I did see a change. I saw him actually responding more and actually having something to say. He suddenly wanted to give his opinion and had feedback and things he liked or noticed or wanted to say." Ms. Garcia also saw some extra motivation in a student who sometimes struggled with more traditional academic work: Nwoye. In our interview she said, "I wasn't sure, having him in my group, what was gonna happen…He wrote for a good, like, solid twenty or twenty-five minutes, writing his story down with solid focus. Just writing. I'd never seen that before."

Since oral storytelling units can help teachers build better relationships with their students, they can also lead to their having an easier time managing the classroom, as Ms. Garcia mentioned in our interview: "I find that it [storytelling] just helps everything in class. I don't have disciplinary issues, for the most part. Once that trust is built, once they do start kind of showing themselves to each other, I really don't have disciplinary issues. And if they are, they're minor, and they're just teenagers kind of stuff, it's not the big things that happen in other classes." Oral storytelling units can even boost attendance, though students apparently need to be coming to school fairly regularly in the first place to actually experience that. In our interview, Ms. Garcia said, "Students who had attendance issues were students who were not coming at all…I feel like once they actually start going through the process, if they're there for it, I do find that there's less attendance issues." Of course, there's always the possibility that a student will

purposefully miss class in an attempt to avoid having to share. Though Ms. Garcia believed that the snowstorm was the only reason Dylan missed the performance day, my previous experience with a student named Dion (who started skipping Wednesdays and stopped responding to my emails, probably because he knew that I would pressure him to share a painful story about his sister's death) made me less than certain that she was right.

One encouragement I found in this work is ostensibly too simple to include here, but I believe its simplicity belies its importance: storytelling can be fun! Multiple students mentioned a sense of excitement around the one day a week they knew we were coming. In our focus group interview, Alex said, "At first, I didn't care, but as it [the storytelling unit] went on, I got kinda excited about Story Shop in the morning. Just to hear stories—for people to tell they stories." And when I asked Tanissa for one word she would use to describe the storytelling unit, she said, "Fun. Because Wednesday was the funnest day of the whole week, because the Story Shop came that day." Of course, just because we may think that personal storytelling is intrinsically fun, that doesn't mean that all of our students will agree—some may simply prefer doing other things. As Dina said in our focus group interview, "I'm used to telling stories about other people and making my own characters and explaining why they do things and finding out their biography. I'm not really used to telling people about myself, so it was weird for me. It wasn't overall negative, because I did find out some good things. It was just disappointing 'cause I thought I'd be able to make up characters and stuff. That's what I thought when I heard 'storytelling.'" Still, it's difficult to find a classroom activity as naturally engaging as personal storytelling. A good story is even capable of drawing initially resistant students in, as Janet's story seemed to do to Dylan. He smiled throughout her story—even laughed out loud at one point—and was one of the first students to share in our discussion afterward. Oral stories can be as artful and moving as any

piece of literature. As Miranda said after listening to Ms. Garcia's story, "I felt what she felt…I could feel her breaking down on the inside, so it touched me…I feel like the energy was flowing around the room slowly."

So why is this kind of work so important to do in schools? This research suggests that when students are engaged in a language-filled environment, when their intellectual curiosity is piqued through the evaluation and analysis of example stories, and when they get a chance to craft and perform stories of their own, they work hard and have fun doing it. These students produced sophisticated ideas and gave meaningful commentary to their classmates during prolonged, rich interactions with each other. I believe this is one of the more worthwhile objectives a teacher can possibly have for his/her classroom.

Speaking Questions

Everything I've learned through this research is inextricably tied to the context in which it was conducted, and both within and without that context, there are, of course, still many unknowns. I'd like to address those that most occupy my mind here. First, there are the paradoxes that emerge from the encouragements and warnings above. For example, if teacher stories are capable of both encouragement and intimidation (the students in my small group said both), how can we decide whether/how to share them? And if telling a story about a traumatic event can be both/either beneficial and/or harmful, how do we decide if/when a student is ready to publicly share one? Just because (s)he says (s)he really wants to doesn't mean (s)he's truly considered the potential consequences. What should storytelling teachers know about trauma and how to detect it? Despite how difficult it was for Tanissa to talk about the events in her story ("it's just difficult to put something like that into words"), she said that sharing it was beneficial for her in the end ("it does help, telling something painful"). But would Angelica—who

apparently had Tajah yell at her, "Sit down! You don't have to tell this story! It's too emotional!" during her story—agree? I don't know; I didn't get the chance to ask her. But even if a storyteller *is* totally ready to tell a traumatic story and *has* thoroughly considered all of the potential consequences, what if sharing that story has the potential to hurt someone else in the room? Like when Alethea had to leave during Angelica's story about rape, or when Alex started crying during Tajah's story about their friend Aryin. How can we possibly weigh one person's potential processing against another person's potential pain? Surely storytelling units should not become utilitarian endeavors, where a minority's negative experiences can be trumped by the majority's positive ones. But what alternative do I have, considering any storytelling unit will always carry both these potential benefits and these potential risks?

Also, though I love the Story Shop saying that 'we should tell stories from our scars and not our wounds,' what if telling a story is part of what transforms a wound into a scar? As Tanissa said in our focus group interview, "It makes you feel vulnerable having something painful like that that you haven't told yet. Just 'cause it's still a fresh wound, since you haven't healed it yet, 'cause you haven't told anyone about it." There seems to be a very fine line between a wound that telling a story might reopen and a wound that telling a story might heal. Similarly, I struggle with the chicken/egg dilemma of which comes first: trust or openness? Do we trust because of previous displays of openness, or are we open because we already trust? And if it's more symbiotic than that—with trust requiring continual openness and openness requiring continual trust—it feels impossible to fully trust one another without also opening ourselves up to violations of that trust. For example, though the teacher stories that Linda, Janet, Ms. Garcia, and I shared seemed to build a sense of trust in the classroom (as Alex said after noticing that no one talked about Linda's story outside of class, "Alright. I guess I can trust these people in this

class"), they also opened us up to potential violations of that trust. (Though, to be fair to the students in this workshop, I have no evidence of such a violation occurring.) Lastly, on a practical level, how can we follow through on the right that we give our students to opt out of this process at any time? We can offer them alternative assignments, sure, but it's not realistic to send them out of the room any time someone is telling a story. How can we both claim that as a right *and* be prepared to honor it? For example, how could I have possibly dealt with Tajah and Dylan's denied request to be taken out of the class (if I had known about it before they changed their minds)?

Many questions about the responsibilities inherent in this work remain for me as well. What responsibilities do storytellers have to their audience? Do those responsibilities end when their story does, or do they extend beyond the telling and into their audience's listening and interpretation? If they do extend, how should that be taken into account during each stage of the storytelling process? One possible way to address this question is to frame a storytelling unit around the audience (versus around the storyteller, as this one was—and as most are). What a difference I imagine that would make in how the stories in that unit are chosen and crafted. Conversely, what responsibilities do audience members have to a storyteller? Is it enough just to be a respectful and attentive listener (which we certainly expect from all of our students), or does the concept of 'witnessing' involve more than that and extend into giving some kind of meaningful response? If so, is this something we should be explicitly teaching students to do, or is it an act whose very power is dependent on it being done freely and spontaneously? The Story Shop likes to keep feedback prompts for stories broad (i.e., what did you notice/like?) in order to leave room for students to say what they most need to. But should we be teaching students more specific ways to respond to a story(teller)? I'm not sure. Also, what responsibilities do teachers

(and, in this case, Story Shop) have to students after the storytelling unit is over? We may leave or move on to another unit, but our students' stories are still out there. Are we still on some level responsible for what happens to/with those stories in perpetuity? I think Story Shop can take this responsibility a lot more seriously. Instead of leaving after a performance day without a trace (which sometimes happens if we don't have an ongoing relationship with the school), we can keep relationships going by setting up Facebook groups, giving out our email addresses, and encouraging every teacher and student with whom we work to reach out anytime. A larger question than these, of course, lies in how all of these various storytelling responsibilities are different within the loaded context of school, where truancy laws force students to attend and where they're graded for their work (versus, say, a show or an evening storytelling workshop in which every participant has opted in). And what about the loaded context of this *particular* school, where a team of all white, female, middle-class instructors led a storytelling workshop for a classroom full of students of color, up to 90% of whom—if the classroom matched the demographics of the school—received public assistance? Surely there were power dynamics at play that I was not even aware of. How did these things affect our storytelling unit?

I also have many questions regarding potential sites for further study. I would love to repeat this research within a different theoretical framework—one based on witnessing and transactive listening. The objective of the storytelling unit would be to craft stories for a particular audience (versus just for ourselves). I wonder how focusing the literature review, the workshop itself, and the research questions on issues of audience and listening would affect the outcomes. I also wonder how a unit like this would go with a different age group. Story Shop works almost exclusively with high school students and adults. In what ways would this work be different with younger students? In what ways would it stay the same? I wonder how this work

would change if a social worker or psychologist were involved in some way. I definitely think that working with a mental health professional would help make the storytelling process much safer for students, but I also believe that some of the risks discussed earlier in this chapter are inherent to the storytelling process itself and therefore—on some level—unavoidable during a storytelling unit.

I wonder how this work would be different if it were expanded to take place over an entire semester—or maybe even an entire year. I have done workshops that were the same number of classroom hours but only half the number of weeks (because we were visiting twice a week), and I have always felt that something gets lost when we do it that way. Perhaps calendar time is just as important as instructional time in the story crafting process. I wonder what would happen if students were given even more time to prepare their stories. My experience seems to suggest that more time is always better, but on a long enough timeline, do the benefits I've seen eventually plateau? I also wonder how an oral storytelling unit would be enhanced (or not) by being connected to a literature unit and/or embedded in some sort of writing unit. How can this work build off of and support the rest of the work we do in our English classrooms? I can imagine asking students to choose a passage from a book we're reading and then craft an oral, personal story that's somehow spurred by that passage. Doing this might increase student investment in the book and/or in the class by helping them see how themes present in literature are at play in all of our lives. I can also imagine having students tell stories that 'jump off' of a written assignment—an oral story based on one word, phrase, or scene in a memoir or essay they wrote, for example. Doing this might help them see how oral storytelling can add nuance and depth to written stories. Lastly, and perhaps most important, I wonder how this work would have gone if I were by myself, as most teachers certainly would be.

Speaking Lessons

I would like to end this chapter on a practical note: with the lessons I have learned from this work and the implications that those lessons may have for teachers. First, not only because of the risks involved but also because of how difficult it is to do this work well, I believe it is of the utmost importance that anyone interested in implementing an oral storytelling unit with his/her students go through professional development around the teaching of storytelling. (It's irresponsible to send instructors into schools with absolutely no training; to that end, Story Shop is currently working on a series of workshops that they plan to offer both to their own instructors and to interested classroom teachers.) Were I leading such professional development, I would structure it around five main principles of practice (it is important to note here that I offer these as guidelines based on my experience—*not* as a prescription or template for how to teach storytelling): (1) Teachers should be doing what they ask their students to do. (2) Students should be given a choice in how/whether to 'go public' with their stories. (3) Students should be informed—in writing—of their rights and responsibilities during a storytelling unit. (4) Students should be given a variety of example stories—and asked to discuss/analyze those examples—before being asked to craft a story of their own. (5) Students should be given plenty of time to craft and process their stories.

In preparing to teach storytelling to their students, teachers would benefit greatly from going through an entire storytelling workshop themselves—not only so they can prepare a story to share with their students but also so they can experience some of the potential benefits and some of the potential pitfalls inherent in this work. Hopefully this process would include plenty of time for 'meta' conversations about what participants are thinking and feeling and how they think their students will respond to similar activities. Teachers can be offered a sample

curriculum to use or adapt as they see fit, and they can hopefully hear from experienced instructors who can offer tips on best practices and a heads up about things to avoid. Below are some of the things I would say to teachers, based on the aforementioned principles of practice that my work with The Story Shop has defined for me.

Before beginning a storytelling unit, think about what you want the final days to look like. Students should have more 'performance' options than just standing in front of the class and publicly sharing a story. Perhaps they can share their story with a new small group, a new individual, or just with you. Perhaps they can have the option to present their story in an alternative form, such as drawing or dance. Or perhaps those students most resistant to talking about themselves can have the option to craft a fictional story or give a presentation on something they've researched or explored. This would allow every student's final product to be celebrated regardless of whether (s)he feels comfortable standing up in front of the whole class or not. (Because while storytelling units can open shyer students up, who's to say that their shy/reserved natures weren't fine to begin with?) Whatever your 'performance' options are, I suggest you present them on the first day so your students know what to expect.

It's so important to be totally transparent on the first day of an oral storytelling unit—not only about what you're asking students to do but also about their own rights in the process. I think the Bill of Rights is a great idea, but it should be discussed thoroughly—not just passed out, signed, and collected. The formal delineation and discussion of students' rights and responsibilities is necessary for the safety of the storytelling process, and safe space must be fiercely enforced and protected at all times. (Though I recognize that no space can be completely safe, and that any sense of safety is in constant flux, it is only through the constant pursuit of safe space that any sense of safety can be achieved in a storytelling unit.) From day one, keep a keen

eye out for signs of distress from your students; take any of those seriously and address them privately.

I encourage you to tell students at least one story of your own, preferably toward the beginning of the unit. Doing this can demonstrate to students that you trust them and that you aren't asking them to do anything that you aren't willing to do yourself. You'll find that that trust and that willingness are likely to be reciprocated. In deciding which stories to share with students, please choose carefully. Consider the emotional bar your choices might be setting. Do your students know that their stories don't have to match the intensity of those you might share—that stories can also entertain and celebrate? Work to share stories with students that showcase a range of subject matters and intensities. Take advantage of the Story Shop's free YouTube channel, which is filled with example stories told by people from all walks of life. Showing an example video is so much safer than rushing a live student example.

When students start preparing their own stories, remember that your way of crafting a story isn't The Way to do it. If a story generating activity, story map, planning worksheet, etc. isn't working for a student, let him/her try to do it his/her own way. Storytelling units can be one of the many times in teaching when we end up feeling like we learned more from students than they learned from us. When it comes close to time for performances, don't push a student to share a story if (s)he's not totally comfortable doing so. This is a process that should *never* be rushed—particularly is the story chosen is a difficult one. Length, intensity, and depth are vitally important factors in a storytelling unit; it's not a token activity to be done quickly because we're in a rush to get to something else.

In addition to the five principles of practice that have come out of this work, I have also learned some bigger, more intangible lessons. First: let the students do the defining. Allow

students to tell their stories their own way. After ten years in urban public education, I can say that an oral storytelling unit is one of the few times in school when students don't have to speak or write in Standard English, and other dialects—such as African American Vernacular English, Spanglish, etc.—can be showcased and honored. In this way, storytelling units can help students own and display their individuality. A story cannot be separated from the language in which it's told, and powerful things can happen when students' stories are conveyed in their own, authentic language. If that's stifled, storytelling can become a completely different kind of enterprise—one that may result in anesthetized, inauthentic stories. Sometimes the language of 'home' allows our students to convey more than they could in Standard English (in which they may or may not be fluent). Also, we should allow students to define what a 'story' is to them. We can certainly offer our own definition (and show them examples that fit that definition), but our particular students have their particular stories, which they'll tell in their particular way in our classrooms' particular contexts, which are housed in larger particular contexts of cultural and political powers at play. Our students are silenced enough. We should let them decide what the definition of a story is and honor that instead of imposing our own. Part of that honoring is recognizing that what is 'real' might matter less to our students than what is 'true.' As such, we shouldn't be concerned if factual accuracy takes a back seat to emotional truth in our students' stories.

Second: relationships are more important than stories. Don't allow someone else's opinion of a student to predetermine your first impressions of him/her. Don't allow your preconceived notions of what makes a 'good' story lead to your shutting down a student who wanted to tell one that didn't fit that definition. Try to reserve judgment even when a student shows an ugly side of him/herself in a story; our flaws make us human. Rigor and fun are not mutually exclusive; never underestimate the power of laughter. Remember that community

identities take time to form; give yourself and your students that time. Remember that a student's (or your) feeling closer to someone else in the room is valid whether those feelings are reciprocated or not. Believe that the process is more important than the product, and *never* risk a relationship for a story.

Third: narratives (this document being one) are always in progress. As Maxine Greene would say, we are what we are not yet. Storytelling units are more complicated than some victory narratives may lead us to believe, but they remain a chance for our students to speak themselves into being, to capture a moment of becoming. What a formative experience that can be for them—and for us. It is our responsibility as educators to act as witnesses to our students' lives and to create space for them to be each other's witnesses. This is a call that should be answered despite the significant amount of time and effort it takes to do well.

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Appendix 1:
Guiding Questions for Semi-Structured Interviews

For the teacher…

1) Talk to me about this oral storytelling unit. How would you describe it to someone who wasn't there?
2) Describe some student responses/reactions to this oral storytelling unit.
3) Can you tell me about a student who you think struggled during this oral storytelling unit? What about one who you think really took off with it?
4) Can you describe your students' classroom relationships (both with you and with each other) before this oral storytelling unit? After?
5) What's one word you would use to describe this oral storytelling unit and why?
6) Would you do this oral storytelling unit again? Why or why not?

For the student focus group…

1) Talk to me about this oral storytelling unit. How would you describe it to someone who wasn't there?
2) Describe your responses/reactions to this oral storytelling unit.
3) Can you describe your relationships with both your teacher and your fellow classmates before this oral storytelling unit? After?
4) What's one word you would use to describe this oral storytelling unit and why?
5) Would you do this oral storytelling unit again? Why or why not?

Appendix 2:
Classroom Community Surveys / Scoring Key

Classroom Community Survey – Teachers

Below you will see a series of statements about the class you are teaching right now. Read each statement carefully and place an 'X' in the box to the right of the statement that comes closest to indicating how feel about this class. You may use a pencil or a pen. There are no correct or incorrect responses. If you neither agree nor disagree with a statement (or if you are uncertain) place an 'X' in the "Neutral (N)" box. Do not spend too much time on any one statement—just give the response that seems to describe how you feel. Please respond to all items.

Statement	**Strongly Agree (SA)**	**Agree (A)**	**Neutral (N)**	**Disagree (D)**	**Strongly Disagree (SD)**
1. My students feel excited about this class					
2. I feel that each student in this class is interested in how the other students are doing.					
3. I feel that there could be more dialogue between myself and the students in this class.					
4. I feel that the heterogeneous nature of this class makes meeting students' individual needs difficult.					
5. I feel that my students have no group identity in this class.					
6. I feel that the students in this class trust each other.					
7. I feel that my students are encouraged to ask questions in this class.					
8. I feel that my students are learning useful skills in this class.					
9. I feel that the students in this class stick together.					
10. I feel that the responses I give to my students can't reflect my real feelings about them and their work.					
11. I feel that my students learn a lot from each other in this class.					
12. I feel that my students do not take control of their own learning in this class.					
13. I do not feel connected to my students in this class.					
14. My students feel that they can depend on the others in this class.					
15. I feel that my students are encouraged to discuss with each other in this class.					

Statement	**Strongly Agree (SA)**	**Agree (A)**	**Neutral (N)**	**Disagree (D)**	**Strongly Disagree (SD)**
16. I feel that my students learn from each other during our discussions.					
17. My students feel important in this class.					
18. Some of my students feel uncomfortable admitting that they don't know something in this class.					
19. I feel that this class does not yet give every student all of the tools they need in order to learn.					
20. I feel that we build knowledge together in this class.					
21. I do not feel that my students have a spirit of community in this class.					
22. I feel that everyone in this class is loyal to each other.					
23. I feel that a few students try to 'run the show' in this class.					
24. I feel that this class is teaching my students important skills.					
25. My students feel close to everyone in this class.					
26. Some of my students don't feel comfortable talking out loud in this class.					
27. Some of my students don't feel comfortable talking out loud in general.					
28. I feel like my students should have to do more critical thinking—right now, they mostly memorize.					
29. Some of my students feel alone in this class.					
30. Some of my students don't trust me in this class.					
31. I feel that I respond to my students if/when they need me to.					
32. I feel that this class is not yet meeting all of my students' educational needs.					
33. I feel that I encourage my students to participate in this class.					

Statement	Strongly Agree (SA)	Agree (A)	Neutral (N)	Disagree (D)	Strongly Disagree (SD)
34. I feel that my students are unsure about each other in this class.					
35. I feel that the discussions in this class could be more student-centered.					
36. I feel that my students learn a lot in this class.					
37. Some of my students feel out of place in this class.					
38. My students feel safe in this class.					
39. My students feel that the discussions in this class are high quality.					
40. My students don't value everything that they learn in this class.					

Scoring Key

Overall SCCI Raw Score: SCCI raw scores vary from a maximum of 160 to a minimum of zero. Interpret higher SCCI scores as a stronger sense of classroom community.

Score the test instrument as follows to obtain the overall SCCI score:

For items: 1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 14, 15, 16, 17, 20, 22, 24, 25, 31, 33, 36, 38, 39
Weights: Strongly Agree = 4, Agree = 3, Neutral = 2, Disagree = 1, Strongly Disagree = 0

For items: 3, 4, 5, 10, 12, 13, 18, 19, 21, 23, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 32, 34, 35, 37, 40
Weights: Strongly Agree = 0, Agree = 1, Neutral = 2, Disagree = 3, Strongly Disagree = 4

Add the weights of all forty items to obtain the overall SCCI score.

SCCI Subscale Raw Scores: SCCI subscale raw scores vary from a maximum of 40 to a minimum of zero. Calculate SCCI subscale scores as follows:

Spirit: ---------- Add the weights of items 1, 5, 9, 13, 17, 21, 25, 29, 33, 37
Trust:---------- Add the weights of items 2, 6, 10, 14, 18, 22, 26, 30, 34, 38
Interaction: -------- Add the weights of items 3, 7, 11, 15, 19, 23, 27, 31, 35, 39
Learning: ---------- Add the weights of items 4, 8, 12, 16, 20, 24, 28, 32, 36, 40

Classroom Community Survey – Students

Below you will see a series of statements about the class you are teaching right now. Read each statement carefully and place an 'X' in the box to the right of the statement that comes closest to indicating how feel about this class. You may use a pencil or a pen. There are no correct or incorrect responses. If you neither agree nor disagree with a statement (or if you are uncertain) place an 'X' in the "Neutral (N)" box. Do not spend too much time on any one statement—just give the response that seems to describe how you feel. Please respond to all items.

Statement	**Strongly Agree (SA)**	**Agree (A)**	**Neutral (N)**	**Disagree (D)**	**Strongly Disagree (SD)**
1. I feel excited about this class.					
2. I feel that others in this class are interested in how I'm doing.					
3. I feel that the students and the teacher in this class don't really talk to each other.					
4. I feel that this class is not meeting my individual needs as a student.					
5. I feel that there is no group identity in this class.					
6. I trust the other students in this class.					
7. I feel that I am encouraged to ask questions in this class.					
8. I feel that I am learning useful skills in this class.					
9. I feel that the students in this class stick together.					
10. I feel that the responses I get don't reflect my teacher's real feelings about me and my work.					
11. I feel that I learn a lot from the other students in this class.					
12. I do not feel in control of my own learning.					
13. I do not feel connected to my teacher in this class.					
14. I feel that I can depend on others in this class.					
15. I feel that we are encouraged to discuss with each other in this class.					

Statement	**Strongly Agree (SA)**	**Agree (A)**	**Neutral (N)**	**Disagree (D)**	**Strongly Disagree (SD)**
16. I feel that we learn from each other during our discussions.					
17. I feel important in this class.					
18. I feel uncomfortable admitting that I don't know something in this class.					
19. I feel that this class does not give me all of the tools I need in order to learn.					
20. I feel that we build knowledge together in this class.					
21. I do not feel a spirit of community in this class.					
22. I feel that everyone in this class is loyal to each other.					
23. I feel that a few students 'run the show' in this class.					
24. I feel that this class is teaching me important skills.					
25. I feel close to everyone in this class.					
26. I don't feel comfortable talking out loud in this class.					
27. I don't feel comfortable talking out loud in general (in other classes and in life).					
28. I feel like the teacher never makes us work hard—I can pass this class by just memorizing things.					
29. I feel alone in this class.					
30. I don't trust my teacher in this class.					
31. I feel that my teacher responds to me if/when I need him/her to.					
32. I feel that this class is not meeting my educational needs.					
33. I feel that my teacher encourages me to participate in this class.					

Statement	Strongly Agree (SA)	Agree (A)	Neutral (N)	Disagree (D)	Strongly Disagree (SD)
34. I'm not sure about the other people in this class.					
35. I feel that the 'discussions' in this class are really just the teacher talking at us.					
36. I feel that I learn a lot in this class.					
37. I feel out of place in this class.					
38. I feel safe in this class.					
39. I feel that the discussions in this class are great.					
40. I don't care about everything that we learn in this class.					

Scoring Key

Overall SCCI Raw Score: SCCI raw scores vary from a maximum of 160 to a minimum of zero. Interpret higher SCCI scores as a stronger sense of classroom community.

Score the test instrument as follows to obtain the overall SCCI score:

For items: 1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 14, 15, 16, 17, 20, 22, 24, 25, 31, 33, 36, 38, 39
Weights: Strongly Agree = 4, Agree = 3, Neutral = 2, Disagree = 1, Strongly Disagree = 0

For items: 3, 4, 5, 10, 12, 13, 18, 19, 21, 23, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 32, 34, 35, 37, 40
Weights: Strongly Agree = 0, Agree = 1, Neutral = 2, Disagree = 3, Strongly Disagree = 4

Add the weights of all forty items to obtain the overall SCCI score.

SCCI Subscale Raw Scores: SCCI subscale raw scores vary from a maximum of 40 to a minimum of zero. Calculate SCCI subscale scores as follows:

Spirit: ---------- Add the weights of items 1, 5, 9, 13, 17, 21, 25, 29, 33, 37
Trust:---------- Add the weights of items 2, 6, 10, 14, 18, 22, 26, 30, 34, 38
Interaction: -------- Add the weights of items 3, 7, 11, 15, 19, 23, 27, 31, 35, 39
Learning: ---------- Add the weights of items 4, 8, 12, 16, 20, 24, 28, 32, 36, 40

Appendix 3:
Classroom Community Survey Results

Pseudonym	Overall Score I	Spirit I	Trust I	Interact I	Learning I	Overall Score II	Spirit II	Trust II	Interact II	Learning II	Overall Growth	Spirit Growth	Trust Growth	Interact Growth	Learning Growth
Ms. Garcia	63	60	53	63	75	78	75	75	80	88	15	15	22	17	13
Nwoye	62	68	55	60	65	78	75	70	83	78	16	7	15	23	13
Terrain	89	88	80	95	93	73	83	60	73	75	-16	-5	-20	-22	-18
Dylan	36	30	15	38	60	80	75	70	90	85	44	45	55	52	25
Roger	84	85	73	90	88	74	78	63	75	83	-10	-7	-10	-15	-5
Angelica	70	78	73	73	58	64	75	50	63	68	-6	-3	-23	-10	10
Miranda	75	68	75	80	78	69	68	60	73	75	-6	0	-15	-7	-3
Nyeia	56	63	38	63	60	69	68	58	75	75	13	5	20	12	15
Dina	74	68	65	80	83	85	88	68	93	93	11	20	3	13	10
Jessica	54	60	55	53	50	61	60	58	75	50	7	0	3	22	0
Tajah	71	75	65	75	68	83	85	80	85	80	12	10	15	10	12
Tanissa	67	75	65	75	53	71	73	63	75	75	4	-2	-2	0	22
Alethea	60	63	53	63	63	64	68	58	70	63	4	5	5	7	0
AVERAGES	66	68	59	70	69	73	75	64	78	76	7	7	5	8	7
Alex	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	73	78	60	70	85	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A