Writing to Build Community in a Time of Stress

by Sarah Robbins and Georgia Teachers affiliated with the Keeping and Creating American Communities Project

In the wake of September 11, how can educators help students reaffirm their sense of American identity and values? One fruitful approach being used by teachers affiliated with the Keeping and Creating American Communities (KCAC) program is giving kids opportunities to write based on researching community life and social practices.

As participants in KCAC, a multiyear project funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, two dozen northwest Georgia teachers have been studying how writing shapes communities. We started with the assumption that doing research on the places where we live promotes citizenship. We have been experimenting with writing-based strategies for community-making—including recording oral histories and analyzing history sites. Little did we know, when this project began over a year ago, how vital such approaches would be in our classrooms today. Here are a few ways KCAC teachers are using writing to build community in the context of current events.

At Tapp Middle School in Powder Springs, Georgia, even before the September attacks, the Pledge of Allegiance took center stage. Literacy specialist Bernadette Lambert helped teachers there review the meaning of the pledge—rewriting the words many people recite automatically into language young learners easily understood. After crafting these kid-friendly summaries, students used art and writing to celebrate the parts of the pledge they felt were especially important. Once they thought hard about what “indivisible” means, for example, they could portray people acting on that ideal in images and accompanying writing.

Other teachers have led similar activities using songs like “America the Beautiful.” Writing and reading, we have learned, can forge shared understanding, represented in products as simple but eloquent as a schoolkid’s drawing.

Writing about cultural artifacts of everyday life has also been central to our program. During the past school year, for example, Peggy Corbett’s students at Sequoyah High School in Canton, Georgia, created a video history of the Hickory Flat community, centering their script around the story of one nineteenth-century house. Another group of Corbett’s students turned their research into a service learning project, cleaning up a neighborhood church’s graveyard while creating an anthology about the tombstones’ stories. Along the way, Corbett’s students discovered the power that collaborative records of lived experience acquire in writing based on authentic research.

English teacher Mimi Dyer of Kennesaw Mountain High School has been tapping into that principle with an “artifact-making” assignment in response to September 11. Dyer asked her students to choose one image, based on recent events, to preserve for later generations. Students then wrote letters to a future grandchild, explaining the meaning of their item (e.g., a photograph, a political cartoon). These pieces—displayed with the images at the school—ranged from precise historical commentaries to personal reflections on patriotism.

Similarly, students of Geraldine Hajduk and Ed Hullender at Wheeler High School in Marietta, Georgia, have become “historians of today” through a 30-day diary assignment. For each entry, students selected a photo, editorial cartoon, headline, or other artifact from daily

Kate Morrissey, a freshman at Kennesaw Mountain High School, wrote a letter as part of her response to the “artifact-making” assignment. Below is an excerpt from her letter.

October 10, 2001

Dear future grandchildren,

Tomorrow will mark the one-month anniversary of the “September 11 Tragedy,” which was when two planes were hijacked and crashed into the World Trade Center . . . I was in my freshman English class when my teacher, Mrs. Dyer, got a phone call that we had been attacked. . . .

I took a test later that day. We were just supposed to act like nothing happened. It was really weird. I didn’t hear any more about it until I got home. My mom looked like she had been crying.

We’ve gone back to normal at school and home, but people still talk about it, and someone shouts every time a plane flies over us at lunch, which is very often, since our school is right by an airfield. Everyone is really paranoid. . . .

I guess I should close this with some words of wisdom about how to take tragedies like this. If you ever go through something like this, which I pray doesn’t happen, don’t blame everyone who looks like the people who did it. I hope you would be strong for the people around you. . . .

Your loving grandmother,

Kate
life, then wrote to explain their choices. By “keeping” this moment alive in writing, Hajduk explains, her students are “creating” a record upcoming generations can draw on for understanding.

KCAC teachers also know that the ability to see others’ perspectives empathetically is crucial now, as we balance ideals of our nation’s founders with concerns like national security. How can our project’s focus on writing help?

Scott Smoot’s history class at The Walker School, also in Marietta, provides an example. Smoot says he always urges students “to read like writers,” interrogating the viewpoint in any historical record. Recently, his students reread divergent primary sources from America’s own Revolution. Smoot reminded the class that, in King George’s view, the patriots of our Revolution were terrorists. And the students did find some striking examples of people expressing that view in the 1770s. Moving to the Declaration of Independence, however, students considered how writing out justifications behind the Revolution framed the conflict with the king as a reason-guided cause, not terrorism. Overall, Smoot’s students put themselves in the place of past writers to distinguish between American patriots and today’s terrorists.

Still, while juxtaposing Revolutionary documents with Osama bin Laden’s recent writings, these middle schoolers showed an admirable ability, their teacher says, “to get into” the minds of others, and to see why America could face “a long, difficult struggle.”

Sarah Robbins, in addition to her work as the director of the Kennesaw Mountain Writing Project, is director of the Keeping and Creating American Communities program, an initiative funded primarily by the National Endowment for the Humanities. She is a professor of English and English education at Kennesaw State University.

Resources

The National Writing Project maintains a list of online resources to help teachers support conversations with students in their classrooms, families, and communities on its website at www.writingproject.org/Resources/sept11.htm. It includes links to websites such as the National Association of School Psychologists.

For information about Rus VanWestervelt’s 9/11 Project and ordering the anthology September Eleven: Maryland Voices, visit the website: www.the911project.org