Kyle’s Surprises
Anecdote as a Strategy to Strengthen Student Writing

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Donald Graves, speaking at a recent NCTE convention, asked his audience, “What gives you energy?” The question took me back to the days when Kyle and I talked about his case history, and the way he kept strengthening his drafts as we talked, enlivening his work with surprising revisions.

I first learned about case histories in 1995 reading Ken Macrorie’s Writing to Be Read. In chapter eight, Macrorie suggests the following assignment:

Write a case history of some job, process, action—what happened through a period of time. An hour working with a computer, a day in the body shop, one swimming lesson you gave a five-year-old, one vacation day when you did “nothing” for eight hours. If possible, take notes as you go through the experience, or right after the act, and record details you can remember.

Choose an action that is fun or misery for you, exciting or boring. Speak factually most of the time… Make your readers respect you as an authority on this action by the way you reveal it in intimate workings, but remember not to lose them in meaningless technical terms.

Pack in the detail but make it add up to reveal the essence of the job, or your feeling toward it (71–2).

I decided to try a Macrorie case study with my high school students. I did not know what to expect, but I did know there was often a gap between a teacher’s best laid plans and the less than stellar products that sometimes emerge from these creative teaching ideas. As I perhaps should have anticipated, most of my students wrote pieces that were mainly lists of generic activities and routines with no sense of the writer’s involvement. However, one piece, “A Day at a Home Supply Store” by Kyle Ransom, seemed to have a skeleton structure on which we would be able to build. His draft gave a sense of what it was like being in the store. He wrote about the beginning of his work shift, getting ready for work, that way he went about arranging potting soil and light bulbs for display, his break, running the cash register, and getting ready to go home.

As my students always have a chance to revise their work, I decided the class should take a look at Kyle’s workmanlike if skimpy piece to see what could be done with it. As we examined his writing we wanted to know if there was material he could add about arranging the light bulbs, and if there were any interactions between him and customers or fellow employees that could be considered part of his job. Kyle said he could add some material, but he didn’t let on what it would be. Further, he did not revise his case history during the course, a September-to-January semester elective. The syllabus provided a few open weeks during which he could have worked on his case study; he did not choose to work further on it. And were it not for an unusual circumstance, he would never have developed it.

Kyle had joined the course three weeks late, at the end of September after the class was well under way. He wanted to change his schedule and assured me he would make up the work he had missed. By the end of the course, though, he hadn’t made it up. I gave him an incomplete rather than a low grade because he had done so much good writing, especially about his family, his opinions, and a fellow employee at the home supply store. We arranged to meet for weekly conferences until he made up all the assignments.

In the first conference I asked why he hadn’t revised his case history, and he said he preferred to write opinion pieces. Then I pushed a little bit. I said I thought his case history had potential and a revision could be part of his make-up work. We discussed what had been said in class after the reading of the first draft, and I asked him to tell me about how he arranged the light bulbs. He did. I was impressed by the variety of bulbs
his store sold and his knowledge of them. I encouraged him to add this material, even though in the first draft he had written: “It's hard for me to go into detail on how I organized them all [the light bulbs], but I can say it took me over two hours.” I reminded him that he had said there were stories involving fellow employees and customers he could include.

The second draft, which he brought to the second conference, included more detail about the light bulbs as well as a story about a customer who had wanted help finding Christmas lights. This story was my first surprise in my work with Kyle, and it confirmed my feeling that he was carrying around more stories and details than he was owning up to. The story hinged on a misunderstanding: he had thought the customer wanted him to get an older, more knowledgeable employee to help her, when she had actually agreed that he should help her. This story took me deeper into his experience. There was drama in the misunderstanding and feeling in Kyle's uncertainty about what the customer wanted, in his need to remain polite, and in his failure to help her.

I asked Kyle if there were more stories like that, and he told me one. As he talked, I wrote notes to give him after the conference.

He said,

Customers came in not knowing exactly what they need, and they expect you to pull a bulb out of a hat—they'll say, "I need a round bulb to fit a lamp this size," and they hold out their hands about two feet apart to show you.

A woman came in and asked for a bulb for an oven, but she didn’t know what size bulb she needed or what make her stove was. I said, "It shouldn't be too hard to figure out." So I picked one out.

It was a standard size. But she thought it wasn't what she wanted.

I didn't think she knew what she was talking about, but I remained polite. I told her I'd get another one, but she said she didn't want one and that she lived too far away and she left without getting one. One of the guys I work with said the one I'd picked out would work.

This story was my second surprise. I asked him if he had still more stories. If so, he should incorporate them into a third draft.

He came to the third conference with a third draft in which he had added more light bulb detail and three more stories, including this one:

Two other employees were fixing the eight-foot-long fluorescent bulbs on the ceiling, the longest size we sell.

"Hey, you want to do us a favor?" one of them called. "Bring these two burned-out bulbs to the back room for us."

The doors that go to the back room are double doors... the type that swing both ways. The bulbs were too tall for me to walk through the doors with them standing vertically, so I turned them around so they were horizontal and tucked them under my arm.... I approached the doors wondering how I was going to pull this off. When you push the doors open, they swing right back towards you. My plan was to kick the doors open hard so they would open all the way, then run through fast so the bulbs would make it all the way through without getting hit by the doors that would be swinging back....

I kicked the doors as hard as I could, they flew open, and I charged like I was using the light bulbs to joust. I was almost through when the two doors hit the wall, snapped back, and closed right behind me, shattering the last three feet of each bulb.

This story and the others he added also surprised me. They were full of drama, irony, misunderstanding, emotion, and tension between adult customers and a teenage employee as seen through a teenager's eyes. Kyle had written three of the stories mainly as dialogues: he was using voices besides his own to tell his case history. The writing in these stories contrasted nicely with the narrative of his first draft, which had become a frame within which to tell the stories.

Kyle's complete text, reproduced on pages 34–35, is designed to show his process of adding material. The production of the piece, however, was more complex than that. He had to rewrite the part about the swinging doors to make it clear. He also had to deal with a problem related to the four stories, only one of which had occurred during the shift he wrote about. In a discussion of case histories in Telling Writing, a book for college-age students, Ken Macrorie suggests that writers might include

facts from several different days' experience and put them together so they appear to belong to only one day. That's not necessarily presenting the case falsely, if you're trying to show what the whole experience has meant to you (61).

The option of using material over a longer time span than a day increases a writer's choices, and it was an option Kyle took advantage of. In his piece it seemed improbable that all four stories would have occurred within one four-hour shift. This problem led to the technique of telling a story within a story: occurrences on this shift reminded Kyle of occurrences from the continued on page 36
Kyle's Surprises: Student Work

This student work reveals how anecdotes added in successive drafts turn a bare bones essay into one humming with life.

| First draft — — — — Second draft — — — — Third draft — — — — |

A Day at a Home Supply Store

KYLE RANSOM

- I make my daily walk up the stairs to the employee bathroom, unlock my locker, and tie my green apron behind my back. My apron is furnished with all the "luxuries" an employee could desire: knife, tape measure, pen, pad of paper, price list, and a set of keys which unlock the back gates and the kerosene pump. I'm ready for another night's shift. I punch my time card and head downstairs to the main floor.
- Every night my manager gives me my assignments. The list of things to do always varies. Sometimes it's little things, like restocking merchandise or putting price stickers on different items. Other times, I'll be assigned bigger projects, like organizing parts of the warehouse, or setting up a display somewhere in the store. In addition to doing my assignments, I often have to "cover the floor." This means I have to watch my department for customers to help, and answer the calls that come in for my department. More often than not, the department I work in is called the seasonal department. We have all the outdoor items like gardening supplies, accessories for wood and coal stoves, kerosene heaters, grills, Christmas lights, anything that is seasonal.
- Today I have been assigned to two main things. First I have to stock bags of potting soil. After I am done with that, I have to organize the light bulbs in the electrical department. And if things get busy, I will run one of the cash registers up front. There are always two going, but when it gets busy, I open a third.
- I begin stock potting soil. There are three sizes of bags: eight, sixteen, and thirty-two quarts. I have a limited amount of shelf space, and I have to set them up so that all the shelf space is used, while keeping in mind neatness, organization, and easy customer access.

While I plan the display in my head, an old man approaches me and mumbles something in a raspy voice. It is hard for me to understand him, but I'm pretty sure he says, "Where do you keep the vice grips?" I point him to the hardware department. He nods, thanks me, and walks in that direction.

A few minutes later, he comes back. He is bent over, opening the boxes of potting soil. He taps me on the shoulder. I turn around, surprised to see him back.

"Boy," he says in the same raspy voice, "you are so out of touch. You stopped selling bicycles five years ago! Don't you pay attention?"

At first I am bewildered. Who said anything about bicycles? Then I realize what has happened. Vice grips. Bicycles. If you say them fast, they sound the same. I cannot help but laugh.

"I'm sorry sir. I thought you said 'vice grips.' My mistake."

"Yeah, right," he says as he walks away, "Nice try. Like they really sound the same."

Back to the potting soil. The space I have to work with is three shelves high, each shelf four feet long. I have three different sizes, so I give each size its own shelf. I put the thirty-two-quart bags on the bottom shelf, because they are heavier and it will be easier for customers to get them. I stack all the bags from biggest to smallest, so the eight-quart bags are on the top shelf. Now, on to the light bulbs.

Thinking of light bulbs reminds me of a customer who came into the store a while ago. She stopped me and asked, "Excuse me, do you work here?"

"I sure do. What can I do for you?"

"Can you get me someone that can help me with the Christmas lights please?"

"Well ma'am, that would be me. I'd be glad to help you."

"Aren't you a little young? I was looking for someone a little older."

I was insulted by her comment, but I was still polite. "I'm the one in the seasonal department tonight, so I'm sure I'll be able to answer any questions you might have, and if I can't, then I'll get someone from electrical to help you."

The woman seemed to be sticking with her supposition that I was too young to help her. "Maybe that would be a good idea," she said.

"Okay," I said. I turned to get someone else to help her, and as I was walking away, I heard her behind me.

"God, how rude."

I stopped in the middle of the aisle and turned back to see her standing with a disgusted look on her face. Sensing a complaint, I walked back to where she was standing with her arms crossed.

"Is something wrong, ma'am?" I asked nicely.

"Yes there is! I'm trying to get some help, and you just walk away while I'm in mid-sentence. I consider that extremely rude and disrespectful!"

I struggle to maintain my temper. "Ma'am, I wasn't just walking away. You said you wanted someone else to help you, so I was simply going to get them. I'm sorry if I gave you the wrong idea. I . . ."

"I bet you're sorry! You're going to be sorry when I call your manager tomorrow and complain. I bet you'll be sorry then, won't you?"

I couldn't believe her. She was definitely going overboard. I tried to dissuade her from calling my manager. "Ma'am, do you think it's really necessary to call? I'll just go get someone older to help you if you'd like, and you can get your Christmas lights, OK?"

"Oh, so now you don't want to help me myself? What, are you too
good to help me? Do you value your job young man? Judging by your
actions, one wouldn't think so, being so rude to customers."

I was becoming exasperated. I went back and forth with this woman
for another five minutes or so. She still was going to call my manager
and demand I be dealt with. I told her to have a good day, and she
left the store. It wasn't until some time later that I realized what had
happened, and that when I thought she wanted me to get someone
older, she had actually agreed that I should help her.

I continue on my way to the light bulbs, which are more difficult to
display than the potting soil. There were only three kinds of potting
soil, whereas there are close to twenty kinds of light bulbs. Everything
from light floods to reflectors, soft whites to cool whites, night lights
to spotlights, bulb fluorescents to halogens, appliance bulbs to
energy-efficient bulbs. I don't know where to start. There are so many
ways I can set them up, and I don't know which one is best.

I begin with the reflector bulbs and arrange them from biggest to
smallest. The 150 watts are on the bottom, all the way to the forty
watts on the top. I do the same with the standard lamp bulbs, and
then again with the soft whites. Next come the colored bulbs. They are
all the same size and wattage, so I arrange them by color: black, red,
blue, green, yellow, and pink. After the colored ones come the long
fluorescents. I stand them up vertically. Finally I set up the specialty
bulbs—halogen bulbs, energy-efficient bulbs, night lights, and
various types of decorative bulbs. I finish two hours later, satisfied
with my job. As I look back again at the fluorescent bulbs, I remember
something that happened to me my first day at work several months
ago.

Two other employees were fixing the eight-foot-long fluorescent
bulbs on the ceiling, the longest size we sell.

"Hey, you want to do us a favor," one of them called to me, "and bring
these two burned-out bulbs to the back room for us?"

"Sure, no problem," I said, and grabbed the bulbs out of the corner
where they were standing. With one in each hand, I headed towards
the back of the store.

The doors that go to the back room are double doors, and they are
the type that swings both ways. The bulbs were too tall for me to walk
through the doors with them standing vertically, so I turned them
around so they were horizontal, and tacked them under my arm,
with about the last four feet of each one sticking out behind me. I
approached the doors wondering how I was going to pull this off.
When you push the doors open, they swing right back towards you.
My plan was to kick the doors open hard so they would open all
the way, then run through fast so the bulbs would make it all the way
through without getting hit by the doors that would be swinging
back. At the time, it seemed like a perfectly practical idea. I realize
now it was a terribly stupid thing to do.

I kicked the doors as hard as I could, they flew open, and I charged
like I was using the light bulbs to joust. I was almost through when
the two doors hit the wall, snapped back, and closed right behind me,
shattering the last three feet of each bulb. It made the most horrible
noise, and I knew the whole store could hear it. I threw the remain-
ders of the bulbs in the trash and swept up the rest off the floor. It
was one of the most humiliating things that ever happened to me at
work.

I decide to take my fifteen minute break. I buy a candy bar and a
soda at the registers, go upstairs, sit down in the break room, and
read the paper. After fifteen minutes, I throw my wrapper away, toss
the bottle into the recycle box, and go to the bathroom. Then I open
my locker, get a piece of gum, and walk back downstairs.

It is now 7:15. I have another forty-five minutes before I can go home.
I notice the registers each have a line, so I get behind the third
register and ring some people up. Running a register is always a
good way to run into some very interesting people. When people ask
me about things that happen at work, I remember something that
happened once while I was working a register. One of the customers
tried to return a lamp shade.

"Hi. I'd like to return this please," she said. "It's the wrong size for my
lamp."

"Sure. If I could just see your receipt, ma'am."

"I don't have my receipt with me, but I really did buy it here."

"I'm sure you did, but without a receipt, I can't give you a refund."

The lady started to get defensive and aggravated, as was I.

"I can't believe you don't believe me! You think I'd really come in here
and lie?"

"Ma'am, it's not that I don't believe you, it's just that I'm required to
see a receipt before refunding any merchandise. The best I can do is a
merchandise credit."

"Well, all right. I guess that's better than nothing. Let's do that."

Happy that we'd resolved the issue, I took the lamp shade and
searched for the price sticker so I could get the computer number. I
finally found the sticker, but in big red letters was the name of
another store. I gave the lady a disappointed glance and showed her
the sticker.

She blushed and mumbled sheepishly, "Oh, sorry, wrong store. I get
you guys mixed up all the time." She grabbed the lamp shade and
hurried out.

I ring up customers and it stays busy until about 7:45. When it dies
down, I go out back and make sure the back gates are locked. A
customer comes in and wants five gallons of kerosene. The girl on the
register calls me to the front so I can get it. I go outside to the
kerosene pump, fill the can, and bring it back to the register. It is now
five minutes of eight. I relax for a bit, standing around with a couple
of employees, talking. When it is 8:00, I run upstairs, punch my time
card, take off my apron, put it in my locker, grab my jacket, and run
downstairs and out the door. I am free until 4:00 tomorrow after-
noon.
Kyle’s Surprises

continued from page 33

past, and he told about them at opportune moments in the narrative. Kyle was relying on an ancient storytelling technique, applying it to a piece of nonfiction.

Kyle and I also discussed how his case history could be told either in the past or present tense. The immediacy of the present tense, he believed, was more likely to involve readers in his narrative.

I was so impressed with Kyle’s third draft that I asked him if I could take it to my second-semester writing class so the students there could read it. We were pleased when they delighted in it as much as I had.

A couple of weeks later I was surprised again when these students turned in their own case histories. I could see how Kyle’s work had influenced them: several were rich with details, stories, and dialogues. Kyle’s work had set a standard. It was published in our class magazine and has continued to influence writers ever since.

After “A Day at a Home Supply Store” became such a hit in my second-semester class, I wanted an edited version for the future, and I asked Kyle if he would meet with me for an editing conference. That summer we worked on the piece together for the last time, editing and cutting. If I were to confer with Kyle again, I would recommend more cuts, especially in the part where he shows how he arranged the light bulbs. That’s an example of losing readers in something like the “meaningless technical terms” Macarrie warns against. I had recommended that Kyle include this material because it gave a more complete picture of his work, and its inclusion had seemed so hard-won that it never entered my mind that readers might find it unimportant. And details about his break and other tasks could be thinned. Following Macarrie’s admonition to “tell the truth” I had wanted Kyle’s experience to be as inclusive as possible, when I could have been helping him to think about what was significant and encouraging him to engage his readers by being selective without violating the truth.

I never asked Kyle why he didn’t think of including his four stories when he wrote his first draft. Maybe it was because he had never read a case history that included stories. In contrast, the writers who have come after him have read his piece and others like it, and have seen the value of stories immediately.

As I look back over the history of Kyle’s piece, I wonder if I should have kept suggesting he come back to it if, as he told me, he preferred to write about his opinions. While I console myself that my suggestions and recommendations were not requirements, I know that a student may interpret a teacher’s advice as orders. I hope Kyle felt he was free to not work on his case history if he wanted to write something else. Whatever his reasons for writing his three drafts, he opened up new territory for me and my students that neither he nor I would have predicted.

In the preface of Writing to Be Read, Macarrie points out that a book on writing ought to include examples of the writing the book discusses and recommends. My experience with using Kyle’s case history as a model has led me to conclude the same thing about teaching: my teaching ought to include examples of what my program and recommendations have produced. When I started publishing class magazines, I thought they would be a way for students to see their work in print, to read each other’s pieces, and to preserve their writing. I wasn’t aware that these magazines could become major texts in future writing classes—another surprise that grew out of using Kyle’s piece as a model.

Donald Graves, speaking at a recent convention of the National Council of Teachers of English, asked his audience, “What gives you energy?” The question took me back to the days when Kyle and I talked about his case history, and the way he kept strengthening his drafts as we talked, enlivening his work with these surprising revisions. Surprise can be reward enough, but I see now that the surprises in this case led to discoveries about a writer’s experience, and beyond that to discoveries about writing and teaching.

Because of the circumstances of Kyle’s situation, I spent far more time with him than most teachers are able to spend with most students. But this investment of time resulted in a piece of work that, as a model, has helped many students write with authority about jobs, volunteer work, athletic contests, sports practices, classes in school, and workouts in gyms, to mention only the more popular topics. Students discover they have a wealth of material to select from and an informed, interested audience in their classmates who have had similar experiences. For several years now, I have depended on Kyle’s surprises to show students the way.

Oh, there is one last surprise: Kyle is now a teacher. Or maybe that is not so surprising.

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References
