Unloading the Excess Baggage

A Teacher’s Story

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I now realize that I missed a great opportunity when I stuffed Darrien’s memoir in my red grade book and hoped it would disappear. I made the mistake that schools often make.

“I don’t give a f--- who you run with, I’ll blast yo’ ass!” My mouth dropped when I read the first line of Darrien’s memoir. This was the last writing assignment that I had given to my tenth grade English students, and Darrien, a young man in my first block, had asked me if I thought it would be all right for him to write about the school that he attended when he lived in Chicago. I assured him that I thought that would be great, but as I continued to read Darrien’s description of his school in Chicago, I wondered. Darrien described the atmosphere. Guns and drugs were uncontrolled there, and he “had rank” in a gang that he called “GD.”

The rest of Darrien’s memoir described a conflict he had with a young man he calls “Benadryl,” a Blackstone from the southeast side. The altercation and the memoir ended with Darrien and his gang “stomping a mud hole in his ass.” Darrien writes, “He was as bloody as DMX on the cover of his CD ‘Flesh of My Flesh, Blood of My Blood.’

The first time I met Darrien was in the fall of 1999 when he was placed in my competency English class at Mt. Juliet High School. I was fresh out of college, and this was my first teaching assignment. Competency English is a class for students who have failed the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) test one or more times. I was told that my sole objective as the teacher was to help these students pass the test. When I graded the diagnostic tests that I gave the first couple of days of class, I noticed that Darrien’s grades were well above passing on both the grammar and the reading portion.

“Darrien, how in the world did you fail the TCAP?” I asked him one day after class. “You have the highest grades in the class on both of the diagnostic tests.”

“Man, Ms. Halbert, I haven’t even taken that test yet. I just moved here from Chicago. They just stuck me in here ‘cause all the other classes were full. I already know all this stuff,” he replied.

Even though I knew that Darrien was not challenged and was really wasting his time in competency English, I was, for selfish reasons, glad he was in my class. I could always count on him to discuss the books we were reading when no one else would. I worried about him, though, when I saw him with other students who I knew didn’t care about their education. The news that Darrien had made the junior varsity basketball team pleased me because I hoped that would keep him out of trouble.

I was pleased to see Darrien’s familiar face in my tenth grade English class in January when we changed classes because of the block schedule. Darrien was in my first period class again, and over the course of the first four-week grading period, I began to notice that Darrien was frequently late and often absent from class. Mt. Juliet High School has an attendance grade that accounts for twenty percent of the students’ average. Darrien’s attendance was so low it dropped him a whole letter grade.

“Darrien, do you realize that your attendance grade has pulled you from a high B to a low C this four weeks? What’s going on?”

“Yeah, I know. I keep sleeping through my alarm. My mama has to be at work at six in the morning. I have to get myself up, and if I
sleep through my alarm, I miss my ride. I’ll do better. I promise.”

Darrien’s attendance did improve somewhat, and he worked hard in class when he was there. When I let the students choose their own topics for their research papers, Darrien chose to write about DMX, a rap artist. It was also around this time that I had to write a disciplinary referral for Darrien because I had caught him with a beeper. He seemed unconcerned about the referral and about the three days of out-of-school suspension that followed.

After I graded Darrien’s memoir, I asked him for permission to use it in a teaching demonstration at the West Tennessee Writing Project Summer Institute. He agreed, but asked if he could retypew the before I used it. The next day, he brought the retyped copy to me.

I reacted to Darrien’s memoir on three different levels that all carried different feelings and concerns. I reacted as a first-year teacher, as a writing teacher, and as a concerned adult. As a first-year teacher, I was extremely anxious about the profanity and violence in the memoir. Darrien could have been suspended for speaking those same words in the classroom. I wanted my students to be able to “publish” their writing by reading it aloud, but I knew that this was impossible in Darrien’s case. The other students in the classroom would have glorified the profanity and violence in the memoir.

I worried about the reaction of my colleagues and principal. If they read Darrien’s paper, would he be punished or reprimanded for writing so honestly about his experience in Chicago? Would I be reprimanded for encouraging him to do so? I also reacted to Darrien’s paper as a teacher who believes strongly that her students learn by writing. Darrien’s memoir was a powerful piece of writing. He employed many techniques in his paper that we had not even discussed in class. He had dialogue, he made sure that the reader knew the setting, he ended his paper where he started it, and he had a commanding voice throughout the paper. I believed this was a good piece of writing, but I was afraid to encourage Darrien or to compliment his writing because of the subject matter.

I also reacted to Darrien’s paper as a concerned adult. I was worried about Darrien. I wanted to plead with him not to get involved in the gangs or wannabe-gangs at Mt. Juliet High School. I wanted to tell him that he was too intelligent to be a part of that. I wanted to tell him that handling your problems or disagreements with violence was wrong. I wanted to tell him that I saw him going down that same path again and that he would end up in a hospital or in jail if he continued.

Upon further reflection, I now realize that I missed a great opportunity when I stuffed Darrien’s memoir in my red grade book and hoped it would disappear. I made the mistake that schools often make. As Eleanor Kutz and Hephzibah Roskelly write in their book An Unquiet Pedagogy, “Schools are accustomed to seeing what students do bring with them from the outside—stories, ideas, beliefs—as excess baggage rather than chests full of tools to aid their learning.” I missed an opportunity to teach Darrien about the difference between a personal narrative and a memoir. I missed an opportunity to teach him about the relationship between the speaker, subject, and audience in a piece of writing.

One of the first things that I told my students about memoir as a genre was that it was different from a personal narrative.

Nancie Atwell says, “Memoir is how writers look for the past and make sense of it. We figure out who we are, who we have become and what it means to us.” Lucy Calkins asks her students “Why do you remember this moment? What does it say about your whole life?” Darrien wrote powerfully about the facts of his experience, but he didn’t tell us what he thought about it or what he felt about it.

I also could have talked to Darrien about audience and who the audience for this paper was. If it was just a reflective or therapeutic piece of writing, then he should have been allowed to write it like he wanted to, but if it was writing for publication, then he may have wanted to rethink some of the language. Roskelly talks about the rhetorical triangle and how writing teachers can explain the relationship between the speaker, subject, and audience. I could have talked to Darrien about what his aim or purpose was in writing this paper.

And, lastly, I missed an opportunity to connect with Darrien in a one-on-one writing conference. Steve Zemelman and Harvey Daniels say that “the direct, personal focusing that happens in a conference is what makes it one of the most powerful things a teacher can do to promote growth in writing.” If I had conferenced with Darrien, I could have encouraged him, as a writer, to take this piece of writing further. I should have asked him those questions: Why is this significant? So what? How has this experience affected your life?

Calkins tells about the beneficial conferences that she has had with Donald Murray about her own writing. She said he asked her questions, “not little questions to show me he was interested in my topic but big questions about my experience and intentions and problems and discoveries.” I

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handled the situation by not handling it, when I should have encouraged Darrien to write more. It may be that he was still too close to the situation and he couldn’t see the answers to those questions yet, but it might have prompted him to think about the answers.

I realize as I write this that what I really wanted to happen with this paper was for Darrien to add a last paragraph at the end that says, “I have changed my life since then. I now realize that violence is the wrong way to handle my problems. I will work to rid schools of the evils of gangs and drugs and violence.” That would be the happy ending that I really would like to read. John Updike said in his memoir, Self-Consciousness, that as we age, we leave behind a litter of old selves. What I really want is for Darrien to write that he has left behind his old self. I have to remind myself, though, that Darrien is sixteen years old and that he may not be ready and willing to leave that old self behind. I have to remind myself that I can ask Darrien the questions. I can talk to him about the audience for his memoir, but I can’t change his life, and I can’t write his paper for him, and in the end, it may not have the nice, tidy, happy ending that I so wish for him.

Author’s Note: I contacted Darrien in the summer of 2000 to ask him if he would read my teaching story and permit me to put the story in Field Notes. I also asked him if he would let his mother read the story. When I asked Darrien what his mother thought about the story, he told me that he thought she was surprised at what he was involved with in Chicago. I was surprised and pleased to learn in August 2000 that I would be teaching eleventh grade English and that Darrien would be in my third block class.

References


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