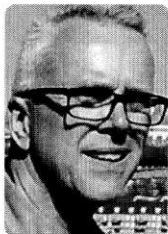


Everybody has a story



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To be a published author is a dream for most people and a boost for the self-esteem. To have one's own story told and published is to leave a footprint in the world saying: "I was here; I have explained myself – now you know me!" The point is that everybody has a story, and it is important to tell this story – if only because you get to know yourself by telling your story. Storytelling and book writing as a pedagogical tool developed in the US and have now crossed to Europe.

Freedom Writer-methodology: Practical motivation for learning

In the middle of the 1990's the American teacher Erin Gruwell succeed in uniting some extremely diversified high-school classes (diversified due to race, colour and gang affiliation) and making the students so interested in the curriculum of the school that all her 150 students graduated – against an expected 20%! This story is portrayed in the bestselling book *The Freedom Writers Diary* and in the movie *Freedom Writers*.

"Everybody has a story" is a quote by Erin Gruwell and the leading motive in her method. By engaging the students in writing their own stories they both realize the importance of academic skills and release their inner feeling which

ABSTRACT

Être un auteur publié est un rêve pour la plupart des gens et un coup de pouce pour l'estime de soi. Avoir sa propre histoire racontée et publiée est laisser une empreinte dans le monde en disant: «Je suis ici; Je me suis expliqué - maintenant vous me connaissez. "Le fait est que tout le monde a une histoire, et il est important de raconter cette histoire - si ce n'est que parce que vous arrivez à vous connaître en racontant votre histoire. Plus que cela: Raconter des histoires est aussi un facteur de motivation pour l'apprentissage et un moyen pour les enseignants à reconnaître les étudiants comme des personnes capables de décider en toute liberté et maturité pour eux-mêmes, la voie à suivre dans la vie! Raconter une histoire et écrire un livre comme un outil pédagogique a été quelque chose mis au point aux États-Unis sous le nom de « Freedom Writer » (Écrivain libre) et l'initiative a désormais franchi vers l'Europe.

emancipate and empower them as human beings – they become *Freedom Writers*.

For the *Freedom Writers* the individual's responsibility for his or her own life and the unalienable right to the pursuit of happiness are core values – but so is altruism and the ethical demand to help others to gain emancipation and empowerment.

This is the story of a *Freedom Writer*-inspired project that took place in spring of 2014. Thirty-three international students from all over Europe, Russia and Japan were introduced over 6 weeks to the *Freedom Writer*-methodology and at the same time they wrote and published their stories.

The process

We started out with several exercises, most of them taken directly from the *Freedom Writers*, to warm up the students and give them possibilities to tell and share stories. The exercises included: 1) *One-liners*: Write the shortest possible story about yourself. 2) *Wall of Dreams* where hopes for the future were posted and eventually presented. These exercises gave an impression of who the students were as personalities. But even though you have a personality and feel yourself

All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them.

Isak Dinesen

unique, you at the same time live a life parallel to many other lives. This was made obvious in the 3) *Line Game*. The students stand on each side of a line, the teacher asks first common, then personal and at last intimate questions, and whenever you can respond positive to the question you step forward to line for a short moment.

4) *Wall of Thanks* then helped them even more to see into themselves. Here are some of their thanks:

- *Thank you to the lady of pupil support who gave me the life – changing advice in 9th grade!*
- *Maybe you abandoned me but the time I spent with you was really good and unforgettable.*
- *Thank you Mom and Dad (Mama and Papa) for loving me no matter what, for all those advises at 01:00 am and for your support in the good and bad moments.*
- *Thank you for always loving me although there were times I've been horrible to you...*
- *Thank you, Dad, we had few times together and I didn't have the possibility to tell you before.*
- *Thank you for everything sister, you are my reason to be better every day.*

Suddenly these international students are not at all just the young, rich, and beautiful students they pretend to be! They are vulnerable and exposed, too.

Gradually the writing process started. The stories should be about something significant in their lives – whatever they found worth writing about. Working in pairs the students interviewed each other in order to give new insights by letting 'strangers' ask questions – and by being honest with the answers. Also in pairs they did the first editing of the drafts. Second drafts were done individually.

The last and, to many, the most challenging of the Wall-exercises was the 5) *Wall of Secrets*. Some of the answers:

- *I'm sometimes not as happy as I pretend to be.*
- *I tried to commit suicide, but at the end I couldn't do it.*
- *Sometimes I don't know what is real and what happened only in my imagination.*
- *When I feel really bad I need to feel the inside pain outside – to suffer in a 'physical' way. I feel insecure about myself all the time.*
- *I often feel left-out.*
- *I'm probably gay!*
- *I'm very insecure.*
- *I love sex very much.*

From that moment on the stories were honest, significant and of great value to the students!

With the prose finished, I gave the students a double assignment: 1) Write a poem for a poetry slam. It has to start with the words: "I wonder..." 2) Make graffiti-poster on a flip-over to accompany the poem. Both poem and graffiti will go into the book. Those who dared read their poems for class.

When the last corrections were done and the text converted into a pdf file it was skipped to the printing house. It was published as a print-on-demand book and is now available on amazon!

The product

We ended with a book¹ on 160 pages including 63 stories and poems, plus 27 drawings. The students searched deep into their hearts and souls for both prose, poems and pictures, so the book reflects the lives and thoughts of these young people. There are happy stories about love and sad stories about loss of loved ones. There are stories about difficult backgrounds and situations, and stories about overcoming 'issues' of various kinds.

One text tells the story of a girl striving to lose weight. When her teacher one day asks her if the apple she was eating is all she will have for lunch, she almost become anorectic: a small and innocent question can be the last stroke to fell the oak – and you never know when your comments or questions become that stroke!

The poems are often of a more philosophical nature. Some phrases will illustrate the questions reflected upon:

- *I wonder how it is to be another person/To see the life from a different view.*
- *I wonder what I'd be doing now/If I'd done things differently then/If I'd listened to all of that wisdom/If I'd put some effort in.*
- *I wonder.../What I would read if you wrote me.*

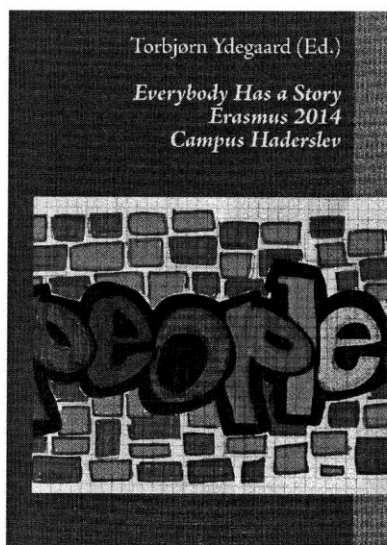
Reflections

Story-telling and book writing is a very practical motivation for learning: there is a very concrete outcome of the effort – a book – and as it will be read by others it has to be written with correct spellings and grammar! And then there are the felt recognition when becoming an author and the relief felt when hidden stories are told in public and on print.

Besides the learning potential and the psychological consequences of telling, writing and publishing, the process also

fosters reflections of a more subtle character, especially when it comes to the stories on intimate and social issues and wrong-doings. The risk is (and here I follow Hannah Arendt's arguments from *On Revolution*) that you as a teacher, as a fellow student or as a reader take pity on the author and victim of such situations or events and start taking actions on behalf of the victimized. This fight against evil and suffering will lead to a collective altruism based on well-defined concept of "The Good Life". And so the demand for maturity and responsibility is taken away from the individual and taken over by others.

This is of course not the goal seen from my chair! To me the stories raise not only pity but also sympathy for those who suffer. And contrary to actions taken out of pity, actions taken out of sympathy are actions taken together with those who suffer. It becomes an individual altruism which always gives recognition to the Other as a person capable of deciding in freedom and maturity for him- or herself which path to follow in life. I know this sounds very much like the American Dream, and if so this might be the reason why I hereby promote the California-based *Freedom Writer* methodology!



¹ To read first 50 pages: <http://www.ucsyd.dk/international/artikel/everybody-has-a-story/>