

The Association of Teachers of English of Quebec continues to support literacy through its annual conference, Springboards, availability of literacy trunks, and various grants and subsidies.

TELL ME A STORY

Katherine Bomer, author of *Writing a Life, Teaching Memoir to Sharpen Insight, Shape Meaning – and Triumph Over Tests* (Heinemann, 2005), (and co-author, with Randy Bomer, of *For A Better World, Reading and Writing for Social Action*, Heinemann, 2001), recently gave a workshop at Springboards 2009, in Montreal. (Katherine Bomer: kbomer@earthlink.net)

This double session workshop was particularly interesting for me, as I wanted Secondary 4 and 5 students to write a fairly lengthy and comprehensive personal narrative. They have previously written personal essays and narratives, but I wanted something of more substance. I was not sure how to approach the project, sustain student interest and generally help them collate all the information I suspected they would need.

Before this session I had learned about Frank Tiseo, Winston Emery, Leon Llewellyn and Michelle Luchs who set in motion a media project, with the support of 'La Direction de la formation Generale des Jeunes', at Laurier Macdonald High School in St Leonard. Students produced their stories in *The Rainbow of Dreams Project: Rainbow of Dreams; Memoirs in Black and White; Faded Memories*. Students interviewed family members and collected bits and pieces of information which they could later piece together to further learn about their heritage and write about their roots. This ambitious project required adept technical knowledge and media tools to produce the book. I could envision students completing survey questions, conducting interviews, and collecting photographs. But what to do with the information once it was obtained is my problem. Could students produce a book which was totally student organized and produced? Though motivated, I had a few essential questions: Do my students have stories they are willing to share? Do they have the sustainability to see the project to its end? And more importantly, what essential technology would we need to see the project through to publication. I was certainly inspired by the students' caption to *Faded Memories* (2004), "If not told, stories will fade away, as will the spirits of those who lived them."

Most students are familiar with memoirs, whether it is James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, or G. Robert Morrison's *To Pause and Flutter By*, or *Memoirs of a Geisha* by Arthur Golden. Students defined the memoir in view of these texts. Frey's controversial memoir proved to be the most difficult to reconcile. Golden on the other hand, perhaps because of its distant setting, was accepted as truth. Students gained a better understanding of the concept of memoir after they met West Island writer, Robert Morrison and were engaged in discussing the art of memoir.

During Katherine Bomer's workshop, the above information begins to take shape.

Now my concern – how do I approach the art of writing a memoir? This is where Katherine Bomer helped.

Before all, the question which must be answered is – why teach memoir? Bomer, as others before and after state, is aware of the individual's desire to understand himself through others. I wasn't sure that students felt the need to "learn" about themselves or for that matter, have the curiosity to learn about others. Another question to address is the actual definition of memoir. The truth can sometimes be a tricky deal for most people. How far can the truth be stretched? Whose truth is it? Are 15 to 17 year olds really interested? Retrospective prose narrative, as defined by Philippe Lejeune, in his essay, "The Autobiographical Pact" (1989. In *On Autobiography*, trans. Katherine Leary. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.), is a real account of a real life of a real person. So this is where I am at – knowledge of terms, hopefully willing participants, and eager to get started.

The following are relevant steps as presented by Katherine Bomer (Writing a Life).

1. Allow students time to brainstorm and generate ideas for writing – these ideas will give students the confidence to continue.
2. Rereading the lists of ideas collected in their journals will help students find a common thread, patterns, or themes.
3. Revision is one part of the process most teachers know is difficult for students. After all the 'fast paced get to the end quickly generation' may not want to spend the time redrafting.
4. Validation of writing is essential for everyone involved. This includes peer response.

According to Bomer, memoir writing is a K-11 possibility. The possibilities are vast. Younger students orally dictate their stories and reflections to older students or even do so via video, while senior students could present a multi-media memoir.

These individual stories can stand independent of each other or be linked by the voice of the author. Even the beginnings of a memoir, with no desire to compile further narratives, can be worthwhile.

The benefits are multifaceted. Students develop a keen sense of observation, become selective in assessing the suitability of a story, and of course, drafting and revising their writing ready to be presented to others for validation and evaluation.

As with most educators, a new school year presents great opportunities to embark (forgive the cliché) upon new paths and engage students so that they see relevance in writing.

To all who shared their stories, I am ready to start the 2009-2010 school year. For now, my personal journey begins.... .

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