

A Charlottesville Tale: Students Taking Back Their Story

The story of our project began in Charlottesville on a weekend in August 2017. It was not told by us; it was told by the national media outlets, it was told by participants, and, later, it was told by the courts. Missing in that narrative was the trauma experienced by our own community, particularly our young students of color who watched both strangers and neighbors march against them and the police, who were supposed to protect them, stand aside.

Our school stands about two blocks from the site of the Unite the Right rally—enough space that I felt insulated when returned to school that Monday. When I pulled into the parking lot, I noticed there was someone putting tar on a crack in the asphalt. He was stirring his pot of hot tar with a tiki torch. A tiki torch he had re-purposed from the enormous pile now stacked in our school dumpster just beside the back door. The same door where any student could look out the second story window and see them. Every day. And it was a full week before they picked up the trash. That is our narrative. While the protesters protested and the ralliers rallied, quietly the children of Charlottesville wondered where they fit in the story, whether or not they were safe in their own town, and, as the trauma faded, how they could change how their own stories are told.

A few months following the Unite the Right rally here, the Parkland school shooting happened. Unlike Charlottesville, Columbine, Sandy Hook, and Ferguson, the victims of this violence told and controlled their own story. They took back their story and with it, their power. They took that power and bent it towards a singular purpose. As an educator, it was beautiful to see because we know that somewhere there is a drama teacher, debate coach, English teacher, social studies teacher; someone who encouraged them, motivated them, and showed them they could take their platform and tell their own story. Those young men and women know how to make persuasive speeches, do research, target audiences, leverage social media, and even make effective protest signs. I'm not sure who those teachers might be, but whoever he or she is—congratulations. It inspired me to do the same—to deliberately teach students how to control their own narratives and tell their own stories. To that end, I partnered with my eight grade language arts teacher, Susan Scofield.

Foundational Text

Virginia is not a Common Core state. However, everything is driven by our own set of standards, complete with high-stakes tests. With this in mind, the language arts standards we targeted were persuasive writing and writing for audience. Our AASL standards were in the Explore foundation and focused primarily on the "wise up before you post" mantra.

Our first step was to choose a foundational text. Together, we read *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas. This choice was driven by the prescient nature of the content, the engaging nature of the text, the reading level, and, lastly, by the demographics of the classroom. We often speak about windows and mirrors in classrooms texts. According to TeachingTolerance.org, "The study of texts that reflect their own identities, experiences and motivations (mirrors) and also provide insight into the identities, experiences and motivations of others (windows) can move students toward more nuanced perceptions of the world around them." Because we had a diverse group of students, a text like *The Hate U Give* provided a mirror for some students to better understand their own experiences around August 12th and, for others, a window into the experiences of someone very like their classmates. Many students rushed through the book and quite a few confessed that this was the first time they'd independently read a book to completion. As a librarian, that makes me both sad and happy. It emphasized to me how badly we need diverse texts in our schools.

While diverse books are starting to emerge at a greater rate, this is an area of need. It would be great to run literature circles around this same theme, but more on-level, diverse books could improve this project by providing a way for all students to find themselves in the story. As the variety of books steadily increases, students will have more opportunities to see themselves in texts and learn more about the nuanced experiences of others.

Known Truth and Known Effects

Having read and discussed the book, the students then began their research. Our research charge was "known truth." Each student's research focused around an injustice of their choosing in the recent or distant past and began with a timeline of "known truth." For example, the student who was researching police shooting of Michael Brown could list when the first 911 call was made and why, when the first and second officers arrive, his time of death, and position of the evidence. This was, honestly, the most difficult part. Teaching students to piece together multiple timelines from a variety of sources, looking for inconsistencies, watching bodycam footage and contrasting it with cellphone footage was difficult, intense work for students. However, they were riveted. Like the best teenage Spencer Tracys of Burley Middle School, they picked apart sources like professionals. There was a lot of talking, arguing, and questioning, but very, very little of it was off task.

Their second research product was to create a web of known effects. For example, a student researching Emmett Till's death might list the photograph in *Jet* magazine, which could be connected to the Montgomery Bus Boycott, etc. Someone researching Harvey Milk, might list the White Night Riots and the subsequent end of the diminished capacity defense. This web helps students understand that while tragedies happen, the effects of those tragedies can be positive or negative depending on the reactions and choices of those involved, that it is possible to change the story with their actions and reactions.

Another Perspective

However, much of the research available was from first person narratives of the victims and witnesses and from secondary sources from activists or "leaks." It was these last two sources that caused the most consternation. Unbiased sources were limited to audio/video recordings and the timing of calls and arrivals of officials. Even reports of physical evidence were many times published with interpretations. The perspective often most notably absent was that of the police in the interaction. So we called the Albemarle County Police Department and asked that they send an officer to speak with us.

The students spent quite some time crafting questions to ensure they were asking exactly what they wanted to know. This was likely the most difficult part for students as they had spent days researching some quite awful police interactions and because their own interactions with the police were largely negative. Asking neutral questions was difficult. Asking scary questions like "How do we interact with the police without getting shot?" was difficult. But, the students wanted a complete story. Stories have power and at this point, and up to this point they only had half, or, at best, three quarters of the story.

Our guidance counselor met with the police officer prior to his meeting with the students to ensure that he would treat the questions with the gravity with which the students asked them. He did, which was an enormous help. Flippant, trite, or incomplete answers would have reinforced their already negative feelings about the police. In the interest of neutral research, we asked all our questions. In the interest of a trusting relationship, he answered them.

Telling a Story that Matters

With the weight of the tragic chain reactions and a more complete understand of citizen/police interactions in front of them, the students decided what change they would like to see. In the case of Philando Castile's death, body cameras was a popular change; but changes like mental health resources, gun control, and abolishing the "fear defense" were all popular. Now, the students were ready to practice controlling the narrative. Ready to tell a story that mattered and ask for change.

To practice this, we looked at some other student-led protests, both in the physical world and on social media. Students were required to create hashtags that would communicate their change effectively, create a protest sign, and make a speech. We discussed social media algorithms, celebrity causes, and writing for an audience. Code switching, or the practice of changing diction based on audience, was a very interesting and a germane to the discussion that supported the standard of "writing for audience" we were targeting. It also helped the students think about when they use which words—an important component of understanding different grammars and lexicons across cultures and how that may affect perception of the injustices they were researching.

Protest signs are less about the actual protest and more about being photographed for social media. Literary devices like humor, allusion, imagery, and parallelism are all effective techniques and allowed us to circle back to lessons on literary devices from earlier in the year. Merging maker culture with literary devices and a clear request for change helped students see purpose in their work and pointed towards reclaiming their story.

Lastly, students constructed speeches. This longer form of writing allowed students to concentrate on their persuasive techniques and show off their research. As this was a generally dramatic class, the speeches were impassioned, well researched, and persuasive. They clearly demonstrated a level of engagement both with the text of *The Hate U Give* and with the narratives that inspired it, including our own.

As we move forward, both as a town and a school, I dearly hope that Charlottesville will never again be wounded in the way we were on August 12, but also that should tragedy occur in the lives of any of these young people, they would now have the capacity to tell their own story and be the change they want to see in the world. I hope that their story has power.

About the Author

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