

Autobiographies

Year 7

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At the beginning of every year I look forward to my new Year 7 English class. Even after so many years of teaching and working with teenagers, there is something that still delights me as I plan for the first unit of work for a group of students new to high school.

The unit is called 'Autobiography', not a wildly exciting title, nor a particularly unusual way to begin the year. However, it always has wonderful outcomes. I see it as an opportunity, in a variety of ways, to set these new students up for a happy time in high school – as far as I am able to influence what happens, at any rate. I find myself wondering about how they are feeling as they face this new step; how they are feeling about mixing with new students and possibly missing friends who have gone to other secondary schools. I wonder what they think of English as a subject and what their experiences have been.

My aim is for students to enjoy English. Even if they are not very good at it, or think they're not; even if they would rather be playing sport or cooking or whatever, as they line up for my lessons I want them to feel positive, that it's good coming to English, that it will be fun as well as purposeful, that they will be safe and that they will succeed in making progress no matter what their ability level. The first unit helps this atmosphere come into being.

The unit simply comprises two parts:

- Writing their autobiographies in as creative and detailed a way as possible. We spend quite a lot of class time talking about our stories. I have written my autobiography and I share that with them and tell them stories about how I ran away to school at the age of three, following the local children to school and just walking into a classroom (while my mother had the police out looking for me), and how I painted the next door neighbour's black car, using a range of colourful house paints. The students tell stories and bring along their parents' stories, and they write and write and create wonderful books about themselves. Often families get very involved in all this activity.
- Covering a shoe box with pictures and words, cut out from magazines, that say something about them: their personality, likes, hobbies, favourite colours, foods, etc. On appointed days, the students bring their finished boxes to school and inside each box there are about six treasures. The routine is that each student comes out to the front, holds up the box and explains what he/she has put on the box. Then, perhaps after a drumroll from the others, the student opens the box and reveals and explains the treasures within, whether sport trophies, toys or whatever.

Sometimes the treasures are too big, and stuffed toys come in extra plastic bags. Sometimes the 'treasures' are alive and I have had cats, dogs and ferrets come to class; even older brothers who've been away, or babies have come to class because they are so treasured. Again, family members sometimes get involved, as they are the ones who bring the pets at the set time ... and then take them away! While all this telling goes on, the rest of the class takes brief notes, and later on we have a fun quiz lesson where I make up a sheet with students' names and facts all mixed up and they have to remember what their class fellows said.

Because this unit takes about four or five weeks (and we look at other examples of autobiographies, and the difference between them and biographies) there is much getting to know each other, and a real feeling of community develops in the classroom. Sometimes very special things happen, as was the case last year with a student called Matthew. Quite early in the unit we had been looking at how to draw and 'read' a family tree and how to create a timeline. I asked if anyone had ever done a timeline before. Matthew put up his hand and said that he'd done a timeline about his life a couple of years earlier. I asked him to come out and demonstrate.

Matthew seemed a quiet, gently self-assured person, and quite happy to take the chalk and show us what to do. He drew a long line across the board, put a mark at the left hand end and said: 'This is when I was born.' Then, a little further along he put a mark, turned to the class in a measured manner, and said: 'This is when I was one.' Again, another mark, a slow turn to the class, and 'This was when I was two.' At this point I felt a little anxious – was he going to do this for every year up to twelve? It was going to take a long time and I suspected that the rest of the class was on the verge of losing interest. Then came the next mark on the line, a pause as Matthew looked very deliberately and slowly at the class, then at me, then a little intake of breath and the words: 'And this is when I was three and when I got leukaemia.'

It was one of those 'big' moments. I said 'Matthew, that must have been very serious and very hard. As I look at you, you seem fit and well. Would you like to tell us about what happened? You don't have to, of course, but if you'd like to talk about it, we would like to hear'. And he did talk, about all the treatments, about how hard it had been and about how, just three years earlier, he had been declared totally well. At that point he put a mark on the line towards the right end of the line, and wrote '1997' and the words: 'No more treatments. I am well'. The class burst into applause.

Coincidentally, that night was a special Year 7 Information Night, and after the meeting, a woman came up to me, introduced herself as Matthew's mother and asked me about what had happened in the lesson. I told her in the same terms that I have written here. She seemed quite moved and surprised that Matthew had felt confident enough and at-home enough to tell his story. In earlier years he had experienced children avoiding him and taunting him with the comment that he had AIDS. She wanted to know more about the class and I mentioned that another student, a couple of lessons earlier, had shared some of her history.

The student was repeating Year 7 because she has a disorder called 'startle epilepsy', where in a quiet room the sound of a ruler being dropped onto a desk, or a sudden touch of a breeze on her arm, let alone loud sudden noises, will cause her to have a fit. If she has warning that there will be clapping or a drum roll, she seems to be all right. She had spent the previous year just coping with secondary school life, getting adjusted to having a helper with her in every class and so on. Therefore, she was giving Year 7 another go in order to make better academic progress. Because of wanting the class to not be caught unaware should this student have a fit, and seeing it as a hugely significant part of her life story, I had asked her to share with the class.

This girl had stood at the front and explained about her condition, what might happen (and frequently does) in the classroom, how the other students could respond and so on. Students had asked questions and the atmosphere had been one of care, acceptance and support. (And, as an aside, every student became very aware of things like putting chairs down carefully, not banging books on the table – a new level of consideration for another became evident.)

It was soon after this that Matthew told his story. Later, as I read the autobiographies, and wrote letters back to each student, I noticed that, while there were plenty of funny incidents

recorded and humorous photos included, some sadder details were also there, about the death of a grandparent, or the split between parents and so on. These students used their writing to look at many aspects of their lives. We had several lessons devoted to reading each other's autobiographies (always with the permission of the author) and a fun quiz matching facts with names.

This 'Autobiography' unit seems to engender a sense that the class is a community of learners and it sets an overall tone of mutual respect.