

Margo DelliCarpini and Amanda Nicole Gulla

Sharing Stories and Developing Multiple Perspectives in Post-9/11 Classrooms

Sensitive to the increased importance of valuing diversity and diverse points of view since 9/11, Margo DelliCarpini and Amanda Nicole Gulla describe activities through which ESL students contribute new knowledge to their classes while simultaneously improving their English language skills.

On the morning of September 11, 2001, a middle school English language arts teacher on the Lower East Side of Manhattan picked up her first-period class in the school yard and started upstairs to their classroom. As they entered the building they heard a loud boom. The teacher, who had also taught these students the previous year, shrugged her shoulders and said, “Well, boys and girls, it looked like it was going to be a sunny day, but I guess we are having a thunderstorm.”

The school was not more than a mile from Ground Zero. They were close enough to hear the impact of the planes, which they had mistaken for a thunderclap in the first moments of that chaotic morning. A week later the window shades in their classroom were pulled to hide the still-smoking hole in the skyline.

I (Amanda) had worked at this school as a staff developer, working with teachers and students on transforming their personal stories into writing. The Monday following the attacks, I visited these students and others in the school to see how they were doing. When I arrived in the classroom, I remember thinking I had never seen such a quiet, subdued group of students. Because the students and I had done a prolonged memoir writing project together the year before, I was immediately welcomed as a familiar presence.

The principal had asked teachers throughout the school to have students write thank-you letters to police officers and firefighters. The students in this class had responded with flat, generic letters: “Dear police officer, Thank you for saving the peo-

ple. We love you.” Their teacher was disappointed in their product, since the work we had done together the year before was far more expressive.

When I walked into the classroom, the teacher was reviewing a list of vocabulary words from their literature anthology. I asked how everyone was doing, and the teacher said, “We talked about it all day Friday and they wrote about it this morning, so I think they are ready to move on.” She invited me to sit down, then turned to the students and said, “The next word is *recognize*. Can anyone use the word *recognize* in a sentence?” One boy raised his hand: “I recognize that the World Trade Center collapsed.” The next word was *treacherous*. Another hand went up. “The terrorists who exploded the towers were treacherous.” The next word was *ominous*. “The smoke in the sky was ominous.” The teacher looked at me and said, “Maybe they’re not done after all. Do you want to take over?” I had no reason to believe I knew how to handle the situation any more gracefully than their teacher had.

The Lower East Side has long been known as the gateway to America. I looked out at this sea of young faces representing at least half a dozen different countries and several different native languages and dialects and asked, “Does anyone have any stories about what happened last Tuesday?”

Hands waved in the air, and stories of neighbors and relatives began pouring forth. After a

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while I asked the students how they would feel about doing some writing. The writing they began that day carried over into the next several months. Inviting students' stories, rather than telling them how to respond to an event they could barely begin to make sense of, led to writing that was thoughtful and expressive. Because this writing meant something to them personally, many students became deeply engaged in the revision process. They were invested in telling their stories, and they wanted their voices to be heard. In addition, native and nonnative English-speaking students shared equally in this activity.

Diverse Learners in the United States

The students described above are not unique to New York City. Diversity in our nation is growing, and while the urban areas are experiencing large increases in the English language learner population, the country as a whole is experiencing rapid demographic changes. Enrollment in US public schools for ESL students during the year 2000 grew by 105 percent, compared to a 12 percent overall growth rate among the general school population (Kindler). In fact, the ESL student population represents 10.1 percent of total public school student enrollment. These changes make it critical to create classrooms and school communities where this diversity is celebrated and used as a learning tool rather than seen as a threat. If 9/11 taught us anything, it is that we must understand and value cultural difference.

The above-mentioned diverse students had stories to tell, but traditional activities offered them no room to share these stories. By encouraging students to use their experiences in making important connections to events and material, teachers and learners can develop classroom environments where a variety of explanations, answers, and interpretations are developed, discussed, and integrated into the curriculum. In this way, diverse students are better able to express themselves and share their stories, which is tremendously empowering for anyone, particularly students who are new to the country and to the language. In addition, the important connections that students are able to make between their lives and the material will enhance the acquisition of content in the classroom.

Learners' Lives as Curriculum

In the months and years following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, a variety of classroom and school-wide initiatives addressing the terrorist attacks on America and terrorism in general were implemented. In ESL classrooms around the country, similar initiatives were occurring, and in many settings, the focus was on the place that the ESL students felt they occupied in their new homeland. The secondary-level ESL students we worked with often expressed fears of isolation, fear of possible violence against them or their families, and the need to identify themselves with both their new country and their native land. They wanted to show their solidarity with their new countrymen and -women, but they did not want to abandon their heritage and ties to their birthplaces. However, they felt that this was the response that was required of them after 9/11. Although the activities and discussions taking place in ESL classrooms were similar to those that took place in the mainstream secondary English classrooms, the ESL students felt that they could be more open in the ESL classroom. In addition, their participation in the discussions and activities that took place in the mainstream classroom was often well below their participation level in the ESL classroom, which resulted in their voices not being heard and valuable messages being lost. This is a shame, since these diverse students can serve as cultural ambassadors and share stories that promote the goals of many of the curriculum projects and teaching initiatives that were an outgrowth of the post-9/11 era. Some of these projects included teaching tolerance of diverse cultures, including Islamic cultures; discussing discrimination and hate crimes; teaching about different perspectives of 9/11; and enabling students to better understand the events of 9/11 through a global perspective.

Secondary-level English teachers can respond to such a situation by engaging students in activities that bring their personal stories into the classroom. Such activities serve to create a community of learners and to support ESL students in their mainstream English classroom, helping them feel that their contributions are welcome and valuable. Using learners' lives as curriculum is a method frequently used in adult literacy and adult ESL educational programs. It is an instructional approach

where students are engaged in the process of “developing instructional materials that respond to students’ interests and respect their culture and prior learning” (Fingeret 14). A learning experience built around learners’ lives would include the following components: “reading and responding to a text; mastering the language of the text; generating new language and telling new stories; comparing personal experiences with experiences of other learners for reflection or action” (Weinstein 7).

Once the students have identified personal stories that are relevant to the events around them, the next step is to work with the students to develop multiple interpretations of the shared stories.

The Need for Multiple Perspectives

In the wake of 9/11, the social and political climate in the United States has changed. Although we are beginning to see a more balanced dialogue emerg-



“I watched my mom reading the paper, and even though she was not born in the U.S., she became intensely patriotic and saddened. I decided to show the actual paper she was reading to explain what she was feeling through primary sources.”
Paula Brady, 17 years old. *American Reading the Paper*. Reprinted from *The Day Our World Changed: Children’s Art of 9/11* (New York: Abrams, 2002) by permission of NYU Child Study Center, <http://www.AboutOurKids.org>.

ing, there is still, to a large degree, a suppression of diverse opinions regarding 9/11 and the aftermath. In addition, the nation is currently experiencing heated political debates that are an outgrowth of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, namely, the debate over current immigration policy and the continued US presence in Iraq. People whose opinions differ from the majority may feel silenced by their peers. Allowing multiple perspectives and interpretation of events is a critical element of a healthy learning environment for all students.

The 9/11 attacks have changed our world in far-reaching ways. In our classroom vignette, the teacher was under the impression that the students were “ready to move on,” but that was not the case. Students’ personal stories needed to be told so that they could begin to comprehend the situation. The stories that emerged that day formed the basis for writing and learning that lasted the school year. Different students had different stories to tell, and those stories related to the real and tragic events unfolding around them. All students can benefit from the opportunities that our story-sharing approach provides, and they can begin to understand how their unique stories add perspective to events and see the connections between their background experiences, world events, and the classroom.

Back to the Classroom

Prior to having students share personal stories, teachers can integrate activities that break down some of the barriers students may feel exist. We must develop classrooms and school communities where diverse students feel comfortable serving as cultural ambassadors and mainstream students are open to the message.

George Ella Lyon’s poem “Where I’m From” has served as an inspiration for students with a broad range of backgrounds and abilities to use their lives as springboards to writing, learning, and sharing personal stories. An excerpt from Lyon’s poem offers an example of the repeating themes that serve as a jumping-off point for the students’ poems:

People whose opinions differ from the majority may feel silenced by their peers. Allowing multiple perspectives and interpretation of events is a critical element of a healthy learning environment for all students.

I am from fudge and eyeglasses
 from Imogene and Alafair.
 I'm from the know-it-alls
 and the pass-it-ons,
 from Perk up! And Pipe down!

Excerpt from "Where I'm From" reprinted by permission of Absey and Co. Inc.

After reading Lyon's poem, the students generate lists of memories that evoke a sense of culture and place through which they create poetic self-portraits. Once the poems have been completed, we put a twist on the traditional sharing. Teachers collect the completed poems and copy them without personal identification. The poems are then displayed in the classroom in a "gallery walk." Students walk about the classroom noting similar and different themes and experiences. Students then share their poems by reading

them aloud or by producing a class anthology. As students discover the similarities and differences in their life experiences, the teacher, in Linda Christensen's words, creates "space for their lives to become part of the curriculum" (19).

These poems can be as long or as short as a student decides, and the language comes directly from the students' lives and experiences, serving as a powerful instructional tool and a way to differentiate

instruction and provide comprehensible input for ESL students. In addition, responding to literature offers a variety of opportunities to invite multiple perspectives into the classroom.

One way to help students evaluate events from multiple perspectives is through sharing stories and retelling those stories from different points of view. First, a short story or excerpt from a larger text is shared through a teacher read-aloud. A variety of different texts can be used, but one particularly relevant work is *The Terrorist* by Caroline B. Cooney. This novel tells the story of an American teenage girl living in London. She tries to find the person who is responsible for the death of her younger brother, who is killed by a terrorist bomb. One of the many themes that can be discussed when using this text is that terrorism was an issue in the world prior to

9/11, but as Americans, many of us were dissociated from this fact. Many ESL students have come from countries where terrorist attacks have been and continue to be an issue, and by helping them share their stories with mainstream students, we can help students construct a meaningful understanding of the events situated within a global context.

Students are then guided in a discussion of how the story might have been told differently if different characters had been telling it. This activity encourages students to step out of their comfort zone and think about different interpretations of the same event, creating a jump from simply telling what the story means to assisting students in making sense of events and relying on their experiences to make meaning. By encouraging students to think of multiple interpretations of these stories, they draw on their experiences and make the important text-to-world and text-to-self connections that foster learning. As constructivist teachers, we understand that there are multiple ways of making meaning and understanding stories and events rather than "one right answer." Guiding students in creating multiple interpretations of an event will help them construct meaning and make sense of the world around them.

Once students have completed the whole-group activity of discussing how the story might be different, based on telling it from different perspectives, they then work in small groups to tell stories from their lives that relate to the main story or event. After ESL and native English-speaking students share their stories in their small groups, they retell each other's stories from different perspectives either orally or in writing. In this way, students work together to understand that there are different ways that stories and events can be interpreted.

Once students have worked on this "reconstruction of meaning," teachers can begin to introduce a variety of texts that have competing messages. Students can be guided through critical thinking and critical interpretations of the texts under investigation and, finally, in critically thinking about and evaluating the world events that are occurring around them.

Implications for the Post-9/11 World

These activities help students understand the importance and power of their stories. Just as they were for the students in our 9/11 memory, the stories are

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there; they just need to be drawn out. Traumatic events such as the terrorist attacks of 9/11 were the catalyst for those students to share, and once an event is removed by time or distance, we may witness a loss in the urgency that students feel. By breaking down barriers among linguistic, cultural, and ethnic identity and listening to the stories of their peers, students can develop an understanding that events can be situated in different contexts, and all events and information can be viewed from multiple perspectives. Students construct meaning based on their experiences and develop a greater understanding of people whose “story” is different from their own.

In a classroom that values multiple perspectives, sharing stories between the ESL and native English-speaking students serves to break down some of the barriers that students believe may exist between them. Sharing personal stories ultimately creates a classroom where the implicit message is that students’ questions and observations are valid sources of information and integral parts of the learning process. Developing multiple perspectives can help bridge the gap between world cultures and different worldviews in a respectful, knowledgeable

way. As we promote sharing stories to develop multicultural perspectives, we help students accept and appreciate diversity and see the similarities between cultures rather than focus on the differences.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

DelliCarpini and Gulla invite their students to generate lists of memories that evoke a sense of culture and place. In the ReadWriteThink lesson plan “Put That on the List: Collaboratively Writing a Catalog Poem” (http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=894), small groups of students write a catalog poem based on such human emotions as anger, guilt, and happiness. These poems, stripped down in minimalist fashion, allow students to concentrate on important aspects of poetry, including word choice, phrasing, and rhythm as well as the all-important heart of the poem.