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One Teacher’s Experiences: Responding to Death through Language

The author argues that English teachers are in a unique position to respond to death through writing, reading, and speaking. She describes four experiences and offers specific, language-based responses guided by experience and literature.

One of my strongest students, Sandy, entered the classroom and told me that—in spite of my “no cell phones in sight” policy—she needed to keep her phone on top of her desk. She was expecting a text from her mom telling her that her father’s heart surgery had been successful. What she didn’t expect was a phone call instead. She stepped into the hallway and reentered with a stricken look on her face, approaching me directly and whispering, “He died.” I hugged her, helped her gather her things and leave, and tried to collect myself to resume teaching the class.

A few years later, while teaching a summer online class, I went back home to Missouri to attend my brother’s wedding. On the morning of the wedding, he and Mom discovered Dad propped up on the couch, as was his custom when his lung cancer made lying flat too painful. His oxygen machine was dutifully pumping air into his one lifeless lung. I posted “came for a wedding, staying for a funeral” to my Facebook page, and Sandy was the first of my former students to reply with her condolences.

If you teach long enough, you’ll likely have many experiences with death. Do an Internet search for anything similar to “death in the classroom” and you’ll find resources for helping students deal with the death of everyone from a pet to a parent. The challenge is how to apply all of the advice to meet students’ needs in specific circumstances. As important, I believe that English teachers have the unique opportunity to respond appropriately because of our understanding of context and our grounding in writing, reading, speaking, and communication.

Preparation

A survey by the American Federation of Teachers and New York Life Foundation found that “nearly 7 in 10 teachers (69%) reported having at least one grieving student currently in their classrooms.” However, 93% of classroom teachers said they have “never received bereavement training,” only 1% received training as part of their coursework in college, and just 3% said their school or district offers it (AFT and New York Life Foundation). That’s significant, since another study found that one in 20 children will lose a parent by age 16, and a majority of children will experience a significant loss before they complete high school (Coalition).

These statistics support the idea that it’s our responsibility as teachers to prepare ourselves to deal with death in the classroom. I have learned to lean on the resources available, particularly those online. One is the Coalition to Support Grieving Students, a group of more than a dozen organizations including the American Federation of Teachers and the American School Counselor Association. Led by Dr. David Schonfeld, a pediatrician, childhood bereavement expert, and director of the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement (NCSCB), the coalition manages an interdisciplinary website, GrievingStudents.org, with information and resources for classroom teachers, administrators, and student support personnel. The
site includes videos and downloadable modules on grief and death support, including talking to students, displaying cultural sensitivity, recognizing reactions and triggers in the classroom, supporting students in times of suicide and school crises, and handling funeral attendance and social media (Coalition). Dr. Schonfeld and therapist Marcia Quackenbush also published a book, *The Grieving Student: A Teacher's Guide*. Schonfeld’s NCSCB updates its site often; earlier this year, the site included “The Orlando Shooting: A Guide for Talking to Children” (NCSCB). I learned of some of these resources too late to deal with my earlier experiences but in time to make some of the others more bearable.

Aside from reading, the best way to learn how to respond to death is through experience—direct experiences but also shared experiences that we can use to learn from each other. I have experienced at least four situations and will share how I and my students used language-based responses such as writing, reading, and speaking to cope and support others. While all students’ and others’ names have been changed to protect their anonymity, these experiences and our responses are real.

**Death of a Student’s Parent or Sibling**

Aside from grandparents and pets, death of a student’s parent or sibling seems to occur more often than other types of death. The impact on the grieving student is also far more significant and long-lasting than other types of death experiences. My responses have varied based on each student’s personality, comfort level with the school, and relationship with me. I’ve learned that it’s crucial to find out early what will help the student the most and to honor the student’s wishes, as in my experiences with Sandy and Kent.

Sandy learned of her father’s death *in* my classroom. And I had to resume class in her absence, when I really didn’t know how much she wanted me to share. The fact that she whispered “he died” to me privately led me to believe that I shouldn’t immediately share the details with the rest of the class. Sandy was an A student and returned to school within two days after her father’s death. What she needed most, she said, was to talk with me in confidence and to receive academic support from the rest of our classroom community.

My student Kent was doing well for the first three weeks of the semester when he suddenly disappeared from class for a week. He was a first-year student, and none of the students knew each other well by that point, so his classmates didn’t know what had happened to him. He finally answered one of my messages to tell me that his older brother had been killed in a hunting accident.

These students’ situations required two different responses, but both involved language.

**Language-Based Responses**

- **Communicate with older students directly to determine needs.** According to Schonfeld, students in high school and college should be asked directly what they would like to have shared (Borris). I waited to hear from Sandy before I told the class what had happened to her father, and I let her guide the direction the class would take in its response to her.

- **Offer academic support.** Asked about students who have lost a parent or guardian, 67% of classroom teachers reported that they “always or usually witness a negative impact on academic performance” through “difficulty in concentrating in class, withdrawal/disengagement and less classroom participation, absenteeism, and a decrease in quality of work” (AFT and New York Life Foundation). In addition to counseling, students also need support that English teachers can offer, including tutoring, extra peer review, extra time to draft or revise, and help with exams and standardized tests. It was clear to me that Sandy needed my attention more than the rest of the class and might for quite some time. When I scheduled conferences with students, for example, I scheduled Sandy for two or three conferences. I asked her peer review group to offer extensive feedback on Sandy’s rough draft since she had missed some in-class drafting. They also exchanged email addresses and met in a study group in the weeks and months after the death.

- **If appropriate, allow students to work the death or feelings into writing assignments.** Even more than Sandy, Kent wanted to keep as much of his situation private as possible. We went through all of the steps such as counseling referral and conferencing.
with me, but what Kent really wanted was the opportunity to grieve privately and work his grief into his writing in my class—and that was where I could offer tangible help. One of our major assignments was a research essay in which students researched and analyzed a group or organization. Since his brother had been killed with a gun and Kent was already interested in the field of criminal justice, he decided that he wanted to research the NRA. I was a bit worried that the research would be too disturbing for Kent in his current state, but his final essay was highly analytical; he researched websites, advertisements, NRA publications, political cartoons, news coverage, and opinions from both sides of the gun control debate. Kent learned a lot; improved his reading, researching, and writing skills; and found the assignment to be somewhat therapeutic.

A Student's Suicide

If Kent's situation seemed particularly sensitive, then Courtney's suicide would teach me even more about handling death with sensitivity and privacy. Courtney had been dealing with depression for years and at 16 was undergoing intensive counseling. Her circle of close friends was aware of her struggle. Still, her suicide took all of us by surprise when she took her own life in her bedroom.

Language-Based Responses

- **Talk and listen.** Our main concern was how to support Courtney's classmates and close friends. We offered immediate counseling for everyone but also formed a more intimate group of her close friends to talk privately but freely for as many sessions as they needed. These friends ended up meeting for two years, until they began leaving for college.

- **Write informally for self.** We felt that it was important to provide opportunities for this small group not only to talk but also to write. One activity that seemed to help was to tape butcher paper on all of the walls and allow each student to write a list of Courtney’s positive attributes. This activity could also be done privately on individual pieces of paper, but students liked seeing what the others had written, and many experimented with writing in different fonts and colors, and drawing to accompany their writing. We worked to provide more traditional writing opportunities as well, such as guided journal writing.

- **Write for others.** Schonfeld suggests that adults “[h]elp children preserve—and create—memories. Even though it may at first be painful to talk about the person who died, keep the person’s memory alive through stories, pictures and continued mention of the person in everyday conversation” (Schonfeld and Quackenbush, Supporting 6). We met with Courtney’s friends after school as they wrote a book of memories to present to her parents. “Writing can be personal or impersonal, subjective or objective, expository or imaginative,” says Richard O. Ulin. “Students can write letters of condolence, epitaphs, wills, obituaries . . . or they may compose verse or write fiction. The fact that students may not have had wide or deep experience with death should present no bar to their writing about it” (165). In Courtney’s case and in many others, students have read poetry, their own writing, and inspirational writing at memorial services and funerals.

- **Analyze language associated with the death.** Aside from supporting Courtney’s close friends through writing activities and discussion, an incident occurred that demanded attention in the entire class. Courtney’s obituary was published in the local newspaper. In the online version, as with most online articles, there was a place for reader comments. Someone posted a nasty comment accusing Courtney’s parents of not paying attention to the signs of depression and suicide. It was obvious from the way it was written that the person commenting did not know the family or the situation and was simply spouting an uninformed opinion. I projected the article and the comments on the overhead, and we had a lengthy class discussion about online discourse. In the next essay assignment, several students considered not only source material such as articles related to their topics but also online comments, blogs, and social media remarks.

- **Discuss how to use social media effectively.** While the newspaper comments about Courtney’s parents were an example of
negative online discourse, our discussion of social media writing led her friends to create a Facebook page to memorialize Courtney. They posted photos showing Courtney having fun with her friends, links to suicide prevention resources and awareness campaigns, and inspiring messages and quotes. It’s been eight years since Courtney took her life. Most of her friends, then juniors in high school, have now graduated from college, and some have married. They maintain the Facebook page and we all post something every March on the anniversary of Courtney’s death.

Accidental or Unusual Death
Accidental deaths might be the most difficult to deal with because we tend to wonder how they could have been prevented. Two situations stand out in my memory: A longtime English teacher and colleague of mine fought through cancer only to lose her balance and fall down the steps to her death. In the other situation, it was well into spring semester when one of my 18-year-old male students was suddenly pulled out of his first year of college and sent to Iraq. In Trevor’s case, it felt like we were talking more about imminent death than an actual death. (Though within the year, he was killed in combat.) In these situations, I had to figure out how to help my students while I also dealt with my own grief.

Language-Based Responses
• **Share language with colleagues.** “Most educators are born caretakers, and when crisis strikes in any form they tend to concentrate unhesitatingly and superbly on the needs of their students,” says Robert Evans, executive director of a nonprofit mental health agency in Massachusetts. “But going forward, the key to their continued success will be something they are not always so good at: attending to their own needs.” We planned a memorial service for our colleague Lena and invited students; many came and spoke about their relationships with her. But Lena’s service was more for us as fellow teachers. Colleagues created a beautiful PowerPoint with images of nature—Lena had been teaching a class on environmental rhetoric when she died—and several teachers spoke about Lena. Evans suggests that “[i]t does not help to pretend to be unaffected, and it will not damage students if a teacher is occasionally emotional about the tragedy or is not quite herself for a while.”

• **Be willing to change plans, directions, or texts if appropriate.** We preempted my lesson plans on the day we learned that Trevor was heading to Iraq and spent the hour talking and listening instead. The other students seemed eager to know more about the military and why Trevor would put himself in this situation voluntarily. I thought that reading a relevant text might help. “The literary experience is primary, immediate and therefore more powerful,” suggests Ulin. “For some students to deal with problems of death and dying can be traumatizing. Literature offers these students a chance to empathize with a writer or his characters” (167). I considered asking a librarian to recommend an appropriate text that would still fit with my planned curriculum. Librarian Marsha D. Broadway recommends choosing a text that “respects individual, family, and cultural differences associated with death and grief” and is “developmentally appropriate for the intended audience” (45). In the end, I allowed the class to choose the next text we would read. They chose Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried.*

• **Find ways to complement reading and writing.** As we read the book, I invited a veteran to come to speak to the class. One of
the suggestions I had read online was to help students identify with an adult who might be of more help to them than you are, but to “remain available and supportive, and continue offering to talk with them from time to time” (Park and Schonfeld). I felt that the veteran could offer them more insight into the military way of life and thinking, and I could continue to listen to students and guide them through a difficult book as their English teacher.

Death That Affects You More Than Your Students

If an accidental death such as Lena’s affected me so directly, how would I deal with a death that affected me but not my students? I found out the summer that my dad died. Even though the class I was teaching at the time was online, it was still a class and I still had to teach it. I had to communicate with my students, read and comment on their writing, enter grades, and keep the course moving along. I didn’t really feel like doing any of that.

Language-Based Responses

• **Realize that it’s OK to process and express your feelings.** It was summer and many of my colleagues were enjoying time with their own families. The funeral was in Missouri, three states away from where I live and teach. Therefore, my online class was my community in the days after my dad’s death. I couldn’t possibly avoid telling them what had happened and why I needed a few days off. Maybe it helped that the class was online. Most of our communications were through written modes such as email and online discussion posts. I needed to tell them two things: (1) that their emails and phone calls were helping and (2) that I would be OK. I was able to do these things only if I communicated honestly with them about my feelings.

• **Write with your students.** One of the best ways to show my feelings and to use language was to write with my students. In a homework writing activity on description, for example, I offered students a brief descriptive passage of my own regarding my dad’s cancer and death: “He experienced the classic hair loss that distinguishes cancer patients from those with other ailments. Instead of going bald, though, his hair fell haphazardly in disorganized strands with gaps and holes here and there. Chicken pox-like sores caused by medication scattered themselves like teenage acne over his face and head. As we watched the wedding photographer capture Mom with my brother and sister-in-law later that day, I remember thinking that there was no way Dad would have wanted to be photographed, with his baggy tux and rented wheelchair, not enough hair to comb over and cover those sores. Worst of all was his Darth Vader–like breathing, even with an oxygen tank, made more noticeable after doctors removed an entire lung in an effort to conquer the lung cancer. He would have easily drowned out my brother’s gentle tone when he vowed his love to his new wife.”

In another activity on incorporating humor into our writing, I again wrote about Dad and shared: “Of course we argued about politics—I joked right after the funeral that at least he died while Obama was in office. If Bush, or God forbid Ronald Reagan, had been in office, he would have surely been furious at his untimely death.”

These writing exercises were therapeutic for me. I kept the snippets of writing and eventually worked up to beginning a memoir that I’m still working on six years later. But at the time, writing with my class drew us even closer together and helped me to cope.

Conclusion

Many of these language-based suggestions overlap and can apply to any of these situations. All of the strategies also involve empathy. As suggested by Sherrel Bergmann and Judith Brough: “Perhaps the best way to handle it is to think of how you would like to be responded to in loss of a loved one” (Ferlazzo). We all respond differently to death, so even after I experienced it directly with my father, I still have to remind myself to allow students or colleagues to drive the context of our responses. The Dougy Center, also known as The National Center for Grieving Children and Families, published a “Bill of Rights for Grieving Teens” that includes
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15 rights written by grieving students. These include the rights “to be heard with dignity and respect,” “to not have to follow the ‘Stages of Grief’ as outlined in a high school health book,” and “to grieve in one’s own unique, individual way without censorship.” These and the other rights can guide teachers as we respond appropriately to grief and death involving our students.

In the end, you can read all of the articles and websites. You can support students who lose their grandparents. You can attend professional development programs. And just when you think you have it, something happens: your own dad dies on your brother’s wedding day, and you can’t possibly think about grading or lesson planning or even communicating with or facing your students. Dealing with death simply takes time and experience, but resources are available and we can learn from each other. Fortunately, language matters and we are the experts in language. Whether it’s through speaking, listening, communicating consistently, writing, tweeting, or posting, language is what helps all of us cope and support others.

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Works Cited


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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

In this unit, students explore this relationship by examining texts on camaraderie among soldiers. After viewing a video on the topic and reading the short story “How to Tell a True War Story” by Tim O’Brien, students use free-writing as a means to develop a thesis statement stating their belief on the relationship between love and war. They then compose a visual collage depicting those beliefs. http://bit.ly/2IX49Iq

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