

## When Artifacts Prove We Matter

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Like every teacher, I have a box crammed full of student notes and various trinkets. Recently, I sat on the carpet with my daughter and sifted through these mementos, pausing to share the story of each item with her. I was transported back in time to my younger self. My first day in the classroom, I was barely five years older than the seniors I taught. My whole year centered around trying to look older, hide my inexperience, and do right by the students I taught even if I wasn't sure how.

I had not trained to become a teacher, only realizing the “call” as I finished my degree. I decided to work as a substitute teacher while fulfilling the requirements for certification. Three days into substituting, I found myself in the enviable position of long-term substitute teacher in an English III and English IV high school classroom for the entire spring semester. The learning curve was steep, but I was armed with the optimism that only comes with youth and having no clue about your own ineptitude.

The notion of “first, do no harm,” which is often associated with the Hippocratic Oath, became my guide. The thought of harming a single student—through words or actions—was unacceptable to me. While it would take time for my content knowledge and pedagogy to grow, I could make sure that every student felt valued and respected in my class.

Looking through the artifacts of my teaching career, each note or item indicates I mattered in a student's life. Interestingly, few of the artifacts connect strongly to the curriculum. Instead, the majority of the treasures that fill my feel-good box are from students who were grateful that I saw and accepted them. They represent the importance of relationships and a positive classroom culture.

One such treasure hangs in my office: a pastel drawing of Jay Gatsby casually standing next to his yellow roadster. I can look up from a task at my desk and find a direct connection to my days

in the classroom. Full of vibrant colors and flowing lines, the artwork takes me back to teaching Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and the excitement that surrounded the novel. It resurrects memories of the students researching the 1920s and throwing their own authentic Gatsby Gala. (Well, mostly authentic—it was a dry party.)

I taught the novel unit right before spring break, but it was the experience that the students looked forward to from the first day of school. They raided resale shops and garage sales to pull together zoot suits and flapper dresses. For a while, the event became a junior-year rite of passage. Students worked together to create the environment, learned to dance the Charleston, and then enjoyed foods popular in the 1920s. Their work resembled project-based learning before we even knew the term.

Omar, a student in my second period, gave me the drawing hanging in my office. He connected



FIGURE 1.  
“The Great Jay Gatsby” by Omar Ovalle, 2008  
(artwork used with permission)

with Jay Gatsby’s character and was so inspired by the novel and unit that he completed a study of Gatsby in his art class. Omar came by my class on one of the last days of the school year. He fumbled through telling me he had something that he thought I might like and then unrolled the artwork that hangs on my wall today. I remember being unsure what to say. There weren’t appropriate words to convey to this young man how humbled I felt in that moment. Realizing that an experience in my class compelled this student to create a lasting memory, a cross-discipline artifact to chronicle the event, was one of the highlights of my career. Looking back, I hope I was able to articulate just how much this artifact meant to me as a teacher. Each detail in the art highlighted that he *got* it.

I depend on Omar’s artwork in my office, the bud vase in my entryway, the box of teacher mementos, and the countless other knickknacks from students over the years. These artifacts validate my practice and belief that at the heart of teaching is the relationships we cultivate with learners. These tangible reminders offer assurances that I have mattered in the lives of young people.

### THE LOSS OF PERSONAL ARTIFACTS CHALLENGES IDENTITY

Because I live near Houston, Hurricane Harvey is still fresh in my mind. The storm ravaged a large portion of Texas in August 2017. Many colleagues and members of the community lost all of their possessions to the sixty inches of rain that fell in the greater Houston area. The hurricane affected us all in some manner. A colleague felt blessed that her home was spared but also bereft that all of the materials from her teaching career were stored in a garage that flooded. I am fortunate that my office is on the second floor; otherwise, I would have lost the gift of Omar’s art in the water that filled the first floor of our administrative building. The loss of artifacts that remind us who we are and why we do what we do can create an emotional untethering.

As Harvey stripped us of so many personal possessions, people began to look outward for artifacts and other markers of identity. If you drive



FIGURE 2.  
Iconic graffiti art located on Interstate 45 near downtown Houston

south through Houston on Interstate 45, you will be treated to the remnants of local graffiti art that is definitive of our city. The art tells each driver who passes: BE SOMEONE. Years ago, the graffiti garnered national attention and had become somewhat of a Houston landmark.

Houstonians clung to the call to “be someone” during the devastation of the Harvey rainwater and the recovery that followed. The rest of the world saw this resolve featured on the national news. Drivers in monster trucks braved floodwaters to reach those desperately in need. Bass boats became lifesaving watercrafts. Piles and piles of donated clothes were shared. Ordinary people lined up to BE SOMEONE.

When our identity was in jeopardy, the community doubled down to remind each other of all that we stand for as Houstonians and Texans. “Texas Strong” and “Houston Strong” graphics flooded the



FIGURE 3.  
Houstonians used their trucks and watercraft to help rescue neighbors. Photo by Lizzie Heintz.

media. A local teacher started the online Hurricane Harvey Book Club that quickly went viral to help children cope with the storm and have access to books. Artifacts of who we are matter so much that our immediate reaction was to begin creating stickers, shirts, and other items to remind us that we are important in this world. Texans worked together to confirm their identity when the anchors of personal artifacts were lost.

It can be difficult to comprehend the magnitude of the impact of the hurricane's devastation. In some neighborhoods, the entire contents of homes were ruined, down to the drywall. Everything had to be hauled out to the curb for heavy trash pickup. Watching your personal artifacts sit on the sidewalk for disposal tears at you.

This year, as teachers in our district have had to learn a new normal, we've become aware of all that has been lost. We are placing greater value on treasuring the artifacts we hold dear and guiding students to use writing to catalog the memories associated with items they lost. Writing poetry and reflective essays

in the days following the floods became a cathartic outlet for students. There is also a communal shift from overvaluing tangible personal possessions to valuing the artifacts of our community. We are more Houston proud—and Katy proud, in my case—than ever before.

Houston's experience with Hurricane Harvey is not unique. Most of the Texas coast suffered damage from the storm, and while we slogged through floodwaters, neighbors in the northwest dealt with devastating wildfires. During 2017, the United States experienced sixteen discrete national disasters that caused at least one billion dollars in damage (Smith). It is the costliest year on record. Those costs represent hundreds of thousands of destroyed homes. The families in those homes had little warning; many left with what they could carry in their arms. Their artifacts of living and artifacts of learning . . . lost.

Across the nation, communities continue to struggle to recover. And, unfortunately, meteorologists predict these disasters will continue. As educators, we can help students process these experiences and begin to reflect and remember and to build new memories. We can stand next to each child and promise to do no harm. An event such as Hurricane Harvey reminds us of the value of the "little things." We are also reminded that the artifacts we hold dear represent the intangible possession of being alive: human relationships. We keep mementos that eventually become artifacts to prove that we lived and mattered to each other. **EJ**

#### WORK CITED

Smith, Adam B. "2017 U.S. Billion-Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters: A Historic Year in Context." *Usa.gov*, 8 Jan. 2018, [www.climate.gov/news-features/blogs/beyond-data/2017-us-billion-dollar-weather-and-climate-disasters-historic-year](http://www.climate.gov/news-features/blogs/beyond-data/2017-us-billion-dollar-weather-and-climate-disasters-historic-year).



FIGURE 4.  
**A local neighborhood waits for heavy trash pickup following the storm.**



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