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Identity and vulnerability:

Autobiographical storytelling in a fourth grade classroom

Steven Totland

Abstract

Fourth grade students at Buckley School (9–10 years old) create solo, autobiographical performances as part of their year-long theatre curriculum. This paper highlights some of the games/exercises students play as they create this performance, discusses how students and teacher work together to provide formative evaluations of the students' evolving work, outlines how the performances are shared, and thinks through some of the issues about the relationship between identity and vulnerability that arise as everyone in the classroom tackles this assignment. The paper uses pseudonyms for all students' names. The performances the paper describes are all imagined works inspired by performances students have created.

1 Introduction

For the past 22 years, I have been the Lower School theatre specialist at The Buckley School. I teach theatre to every student in kindergarten through fifth grade. Students have theatre class once a week, all year long. They come, most often, in groups of twelve. Classes for kindergarten through third grade meet for thirty minutes. Fourth and fifth grade students have class for forty minutes.

For the past five years, fourth grade students (9–10 years old) and I have worked our way through a unit on autobiographical storytelling. This essay highlights some of the games/exercises we play as students imagine and create a solo, autobiographical performance, discusses how students and I work together to provide formative evaluations of their evolving work, outlines how we come together to share the students' performances, and thinks through some of the issues about the relationship between identity and vulnerability that arise as everyone in the classroom tackles this assignment.

Much of what I know and pass on to my students has been absorbed over many years, and from multiple sources. Some of the games I teach come to me from more than one teacher. Some games are buried so deep in my experience I can't recollect who taught them to me first. I know I continually modify what I've learned from others to make it better serve the

situation at hand. I will, to the best of my ability, acknowledge the teacher-mentors whose work informs how, and what, I teach in this unit.

2 Dynamic Storytellers

The Buckley School is an independent, K–12 school located in the Sherman Oaks neighbourhood of Los Angeles. Founded by Dr. Isabelle Buckley in 1933, the school has at its core what Dr. Buckley called a "Four-Fold Plan" of education. Buckley students pursue a curriculum rooted in academics, artmaking, athletics, and moral education.

Recently, the school adopted a rubric it calls Portrait of a Graduate (POG). The POG builds on Dr. Buckley's Four-Fold Plan by delineating five qualities the school believes individuals will need for future success: true friend, creative thinker, resilient explorer, inclusive leader, and dynamic storyteller. Every aspect of a student's experience at Buckley is measured against how well it supports one, or more, of these skills. While each of the five POG skills finds expression in the Lower School theatre curriculum, dynamic storyteller is, perhaps, the one most central to the work undertaken in this unit on autobiographical performance.

According to the POG, a dynamic storyteller is a person who, "communicates with clarity and purpose, finds joy in artistic expression, examines the human condition, engages the senses, and discerns and promotes truth (Mission, Vision, & Values, n.d.)."

The fourth-grade unit on autobiographical storytelling not only supports the students' ongoing quest to acquire important POG skills but also dovetails with two important aspects of the Lower School curriculum. First, fourth grade students study biography as a literary form as part of their literature curriculum. Creating an autobiographical narrative enriches students' understanding of the biographical process. Second, autobiographical storytelling supports a central part of the Lower School's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion work; a program called Sharing Our Stories.

Sharing Our Stories is a program that allows students to tell others important aspects of their family's history. Students who participate in the program present their narratives at a Lower School assembly. A family's cultural background, their religious beliefs, their immigration story, fun activities the family likes to do, and important holiday rituals the family observes are some of the topics oftentimes included in a Sharing Our Stories narrative. The school believes learning more about our families' diverse cultures adds richness to our community and strengthens our bonds. We also believe students who are free to be present in the richness of their intersectional lives are happier, more active, more successful learners in the classroom. The fourth-grade autobiographical storytelling unit builds on work started in

Sharing Our Stories by allowing each student a chance to explore and share important aspects of their life with others in their class.

3 We Begin

Fourth grade students and I begin building their autobiographical performances by discussing what the words “auto,” “bio,” and “graphy” mean. Students lay their ideas about these words next to ideas they have about the biographies they’ve been reading in their homeroom class. We ask ourselves questions like, “Why share the story of someone’s life?” “What sort of events are put into these kinds of stories?” “Which aspects of another person’s life do I find most interesting?”

We talk about how we feel about sharing our own stories.

> “What’s happened in my life that I’d like to share with others?”
>
> “Why is this something I’d like others to know about?”
>
> “What parts of my life do I feel comfortable sharing?”
>
> “What parts of my life do I want to keep to myself?”
>
> “How do I decide what I want to keep to myself and what I want to share?”

This last question leads us to a discussion of what Wallace Bacon (former chair of the Performance Studies Department at Northwestern University) might have called the “tensive” nature of autobiography. Bacon uses “tenseness” to describe the “rhythmic movement” that exists between the “contrary pulls” of literary devices. He suggests it’s this contrary pull between devices that activates literature in the reader’s imagination. He goes on to say, “These oppositions create awareness in us if we attend to them without distraction” (Bacon, 1972, p. 37). In this assignment, we focus on the “contrary pull” that exists between an auto biographer's need to share something that makes them unique, and a performer’s need to feel safe about the information they share with others. Following Bacon’s advice, we pay close attention to how we experience this pull between sharing and safety. We ask ourselves what is revealed by shifts in our experience of autobiographical tenseness, and what these shifts might tell us about our relationship to the stories we are building.

Our discussion about autobiographical tenseness leads us to the first of several games we play as we prepare to make our autobiographical performances.

3.1 Circle of Truth: Exploring the Pull Between Safety and Sharing

The first game we played was called Circle of Truth. We play this to get a feeling for which aspects of ourselves we feel comfortable sharing, and which aspects we prefer to keep to ourselves. I learned about this game from my colleague and mentor Neil Nash.

Students make a large circle with chairs. There is one less chair than there are players in the game. One student stands in the centre; everyone else sits in a chair. The person standing in the centre shares something that is true for them. The sharing takes the form of an "I statement", "I have a pet", "I feel confident doing math", "I'm allergic to peanuts".

Anyone who shares the same "truth" stands up and runs to change seats with someone else who is standing. The person who shared their truth tries to take a seat in one of the open chairs. If they are successful, this leaves a new person standing in the centre. The new person shares a personal truth with the class, and the dash to exchange seats begins again. If no one shares this particular "truth," or if everyone else makes it to a new chair before the sharer, the sharer shares another "truth."

I always start the game by sharing one of my truths. I choose something that is personal but not too revealing. I want to show a willingness to be personal, but I don't want to establish a precedent that might make others uncomfortable. This is not a competition to see who can reveal the most "dangerous" truth. Most times I begin with "I have a sister" or "I'm afraid to fly in an airplane".

The only sounds we should hear during the game are the I-statements coming from the person standing in the centre. Players, when they are sitting in chairs, are silent. The focus is on hearing and accepting each other's truths without comment.

After a bit, students who have not been caught standing in the centre may slow themselves down in hopes of being left standing. I remind the students that getting to a new chair as quickly as possible is one of the rules of the game. I also tell them that if the same people are repeatedly left standing, I will ask them to take a seat so someone who has not yet had a turn, and would like to do so, may share their "truth" with the class.

I remind students that we don't need to hear someone's words to know what they are thinking. Nodding the head, shifting the eyes, even the way a person breathes can signal how someone feels about what someone else has shared. The focus of the game is learning how to hear and accept another's "truth" without comment.

After playing the game, I ask students to reflect on what it was like to share a "truth."

> "Which did you like better; sharing your truth, or hearing from someone else?"
>
> "Was it hard deciding which truth to share?"
>
> "Was it difficult to keep your feelings about someone else's truth to yourself?"

Because the game is a class favourite and we play it many times, I always ask, "Was playing the game today different from playing it in the past? Can you tell us how it differed?"

Some students will share something that seems very personal; "I get angry with my dad," for instance. Others will share what feels less risky, "I'm wearing a red shirt." I remind myself, and the students, the focus of the game is on the act of sharing and receiving, and not on the substance of the truth being shared. Students and I will return to this notion of sharing and receiving without comment when we offer feedback on each other's performances later in the process.

3.2 A Very Simple Story: Everyone Has an Interesting Story

One obstacle many students face is the feeling they have nothing interesting to tell.

> "My life is boring."
>
> "I haven't done anything."
>
> "Everyone is more interesting than I am."

I remind them that the school's POG places primary value on what a storyteller does, and not on the content of their story. I ask them to think about how they feel when they hear someone teach us about their life while Sharing Our Stories. "Are those stories about unusual events, or are they from everyday life?" We spend some time thinking about situations in which being able to tell a story from one's own life will be an important skill to have. Lastly, I ask them to consider that what seems to one person to be an everyday experience can be, for someone else, a new and exciting adventure.

To help students overcome this insecurity, I tell them, "We're going to play a game. We're going to see what we can do to make a very simple story interesting." I ask them to think about a time in which they ran an errand. The errand could be going to the grocery store with a parent. It could be walking food to a sick neighbour. It could be returning to the science lab to look for a lost eraser. I tell them, "You will have one minute to tell the story of this errand. Everything in your story must be true."

I give them a short bit of time to think about how they want to tell their story. I ask them to think about the beginning (Why do you have to run this errand?), the end (Are you successful?), and the middle (What problems do you have to overcome in order to accomplish this task?) of the story.

Then, I divide the class into two-person teams; one person tells their story, the other person listens. As with Circle of Truth, the listener accepts what they hear without question. The storyteller speaks for one minute. After one minute I call, “Stop.” The speaker stops where they are in their narrative. They may not be finished. Most are not. This is okay. The listener does not ask any questions.

Students change positions. The one who listened has one minute to tell their story.

After both have told their story I ask everyone to think, “What might you change about how you tell this story? What details might you add? What details can you leave out?” “How can you use vocal variety, and body language to make your performance more interesting?”

I give students new partners, and they repeat the exercise. Each person has one minute to tell the same story to someone new. Storytellers are free to make any changes they think will make the story better. They sometimes ask if they can make things up, however, my response is no, as their story must always remain true.

We repeat this exercise many times. Each time, students are challenged to find something they can do to improve their performance. Near the end of class, we gather for a discussion. The priority of this discussion is the question; “who can tell me something interesting they heard in someone else’s story?” We talk about what each of us heard, even in these everyday stories, something that kept our attention, and made us want to know more.

3.3 Mirror: Seeing And Being Seen

This is a well-known game. Most anyone who has taken a class in improvisation, or story theatre, or contact improvisation is familiar with its basic outline. I first learned the game when I was in junior high school and took a summer theatre class sponsored by my hometown arts council. My teacher, that summer, was Cyndi Vetter. Looking back, I realize the camp’s curriculum was heavily influenced by the work of educator, and performance theorist Viola Spolin.

Mirror, as outlined by Spolin (1999, p.61), is played in pairs. One person stands in front of the other and initiates a series of physical movements. The second player reflects the initiator’s actions.

Buckley students begin playing Mirror in first grade. By the time they reach fourth grade, most are very skilled at initiating and reflect movement in two-person teams. My purpose for playing the game as preparation for the autobiographical performances differs from its original focus. We play the game to get a sense of what it is like to stand in front of the entire class and be the focus of everyone's attention.

As with Spolin's version, emphasis is placed on what Spolin describes as, "exact mirror reflection of the initiator's movements" (Spolin, 1999, p.61). However, unlike the game Spolin describes, instead of playing Mirror in pairs this time we play with one student "initiating" and the entire class "reflecting."

My side coaching for the "reflectors" is much the same as Spolin's. "Reflect what you see" and "don't anticipate." And, like Spolin, I encourage the "initiator" to use their entire body, and to extend their movements as far as they can.

Unlike Spolin, however, I also provide side coaching for those initiating movement. I coach initiators to focus on what they see the reflectors doing.

> "Watch how everyone moves",
>
> "Are they reflecting you accurately?",
>
> "What can you do to make it easier for them to reflect your movements?"

My hope is that asking initiators to focus their attention on an action that is outside themselves, rather than on what they are doing, will allow students an opportunity to perform in front of others free from the self-conscious, interior chatter that can accompany a performance and can (at times) lead to performance anxiety.

3.4 Brainstorming: Imagining Many Possibilities

The last thing we do, before students begin making their own performances, is brainstorm prompts for stories we'd like to hear. I ask, "What are some things you would like to learn about the others in our class?" "What are some things you would like to share about yourself?" I write our ideas on the board. I make sure everyone sees at least one of their ideas on our list. Some prompts generated by a recent fourth-grade class were:

> What is the proudest moment of your life?
>
> What was the worst day of your life?
>
> What is the most difficult decision you've ever had to make?
>
> What is the best holiday you've ever had?

> What is the funniest thing you've ever seen?
>
> What was the best sports game you ever played?

I put students in small groups and give them ten minutes to brainstorm topics for their stories. At the end of the time, we come together, and each student shares the topics they've chosen.

I remind the students we think of our classroom as a laboratory. We are investigators working to figure out how performances are made, and how they work. Like all investigators, we may learn something that makes us want to make changes to what we are doing. Sometimes a student will want to leave behind the story they've been working on and begin something new. A student who can give me specific reasons for starting anew is allowed to make a fresh start. However, my experience is that most times, students want a fresh start because they've arrived at a stumbling block; a bit of story they are uncomfortable sharing, or a piece of business they are unsure how to stage. They believe the new story will be easier to create. I find if students come to terms (literally speak aloud) with what it is about their current story that makes them want to move on to something new they can, almost always, imagine a solution to the problem they are facing.

4 Making the Performance

Fourth grade students are very eager to put their stories on their feet. They begin making their performance as soon as they have settled on the story they want to tell.

4.1 Five Stage Pictures: Showing The Action

Students begin constructing their narratives and building their performances by using an exercise I learned in a workshop I took from Tim Miller[1]. I don't remember what Miller called the exercise. I think of it as Five Stage Pictures. The exercise Miller taught, as I remember it, goes like this:

> Think of a story you want to tell.
>
> Think of the five most important sentences in that story.
>
> Make a stage picture with your body that shows the action in each of these sentences.
>
> Perform the images, one after another, in a continual loop.
>
> Strike each image with energy and precision.

[1] You can learn more about Tim Miller and his work as a performance artist and writer by visiting his website: https://timmillerperformer.com

> Do not let one image blend into the next.
>
> Make the images as different from each other as you can.
>
> Use all parts of the stage to make your images.
>
> This is a silent performance.

The day we begin making our performances I ask, "Who knows the first sentence of their story? Show me with a thumbs up if you know how your story starts."

Then I ask, "Who thinks they can use their body to make a stage picture of that first sentence? A stage picture is like a photograph. No words. Just a still image of your character doing the action of your first sentence."

I choose a volunteer to show us their stage picture. I encourage performers to make the image using their entire body.

> "Feel energy all the way to the ends of your fingers."
>
> "Plant your feet firmly."
>
> "What are your knees, your elbows doing?"
>
> "What expression is on your face?"

I give every student who wants to show their first picture a chance to do so. This early in the process, we move from one performance to the next without providing feedback. As with the game Circle of Truth, we accept that what each performer offers is complete and "true."

Then, I give each student a sheet of paper. I ask them to write the five most important sentences for their story. "Sentence number one will be at the beginning. Sentence five will be near the end." I encourage students to record their sentences quickly. "Write the first ideas that come to your mind. You can make changes later." I also encourage them to write them out of order. "Write sentence one first, then write sentence five. Make sentence three next. Sentences two and four fill in the gaps. Don't worry about spelling or punctuation. The audience will never see your sentences. What you write is only for you."

Sometimes a student will ask if they can draw pictures instead of writing sentences; my answer to this is always yes as this worksheet is only for them, and it is their own way of remembering what happens in their story.

Then, I ask them to make a stage picture for each of their five sentences. I give them time to practice their pictures, performing them in a continuous loop.

I give each student a partner and ask them to perform their stage pictures for one another. “Do your pictures three times for each other without stopping.”

I ask, “Is there anyone who wants to show their stage pictures to the entire class?” I choose a volunteer and ask them to come on stage and perform their stage pictures, in sequence, three times without stopping. At this point, we begin to add audience feedback to our process.

4.2 Providing Feedback: What Audience Members Understand

Learning how to provide and accept constructive feedback from colleagues is an important part of the K–5 theatre program. For our work on autobiographical storytelling, students and I use a process organized around three activities: observation, interpretation, and exploration.

Starting in third grade students begin to distinguish between observations and interpretations. We think of an observation as a description of an action; something the performer says, or does, during a performance. An interpretation is what an audience member thinks an action means.

Most times, audience members will be able to reach consensus on an observation; “Tommy stood in the centre of the stage at the beginning of his performance,” for example. This observation may, however, lead to differing interpretations; “Tommy was listening to birds,” or “Tommy was sad,” or “Tommy was waiting for a bus.”

We begin by offering observations. After several students have offered their observations about what we’ve seen, we move on to interpretations.

When it comes time for sharing interpretations, I introduce the idea of a “reasonable range” of interpretations. The idea of a “reasonable range” acknowledges that audience members who see the same piece of performance behaviour, and arrive at similar observations for what they’ve seen, may interpret what they’ve seen differently. For example; a performer sits centre stage, leans forward, squints her eyes, and slowly moves one hand back-and-forth under her right eye. A “reasonable” interpretation might be something like, “Lois is putting on eye liner,” or “Lois is putting in a contact lens.” I always ask students to explain how they arrived at their interpretation. “The way she squinted made it seem like she was looking in a mirror.” “She moved her hand slowly, so I knew she was trying to be careful.” Was she applying makeup, or putting in her contact lens? These are two very different things, but each seems “reasonable” because it fits into the context of the story Lois is telling.

Having audience members share how they arrive at their interpretation is helpful for several reasons. First, modelling how the various parts of a performance coalesce to make meaning in one student’s mind can show those who were (perhaps) stumped by what was happening

a pathway for understanding. Second, hearing how audience members interpret what they've seen can help performers know which parts of their performance are communicating effectively, and which parts need clarification. Third, having students make their thinking visible offers the teacher valuable insight into how they process the information they are being given.

The notion of a "reasonable" interpretation suggests there are interpretations that are "unreasonable." "Unreasonable" means an interpretation that falls outside of what makes sense in the context of a student's story. "I thought Lois was waiting for the dentist," would be an "unreasonable" interpretation for the above observation.

Sometimes, the misinterpretation results from what I think of as an honest misreading. "I thought Lois looked nervous," a student might say, "and I do that with my hand whenever I get nervous, so I thought she was waiting for the dentist." In this case, we can talk about the larger context of the story and whether "waiting for the dentist" makes sense in terms of the story Lois is telling.

Sometimes, it becomes clear a student offers this kind of interpretation hoping the absurdity of the thought will engender a laugh. In this case, we can both celebrate the student's ingenuity (by figuring out how the comment works to create a laugh) and keep the conversation on track (by thinking about whether "going for the funny" is the best use of the student's talent and our time).

Sometimes, students may sense they are not putting things together the same way as others and may use humour as a way of covering over their anxiety. In these cases, detailing a student's description of what they see and hear, and how they put these pieces together to make meaning can be a valuable part of the student's academic evaluation. Especially, if teachers notice the student having similar difficulties in other subjects.

4.3 Adding Words: Showing What Is Inside

After everyone has had a chance to share a silent performance of their five stage pictures, we begin adding words.

I remind the students of Buckley's POG, and the importance the school places on a student's ability to be a storyteller who engages the senses. "Engaging the senses is how you find the information that fills in the gaps between your stage pictures. Everyone can tell a story about their most terrible day. What makes your most terrible day unique are the things you see, and hear, and smell, and taste, and touch, and the emotions you experience while you have your

terrible day." I tell students to add words to their performance that will allow us to understand what is going on inside their body.

Next, students perform their Five Stage Pictures and add words that describe the sensations they are experiencing, the emotions they are feeling, and the thoughts they are thinking in each moment. Lois, who is putting on makeup before a dance competition, may say something like, "I see all the lights in the mirror. I hear the other team's music coming from the stage. I feel like my heart is pounding-pounding-pounding."

4.4 Memorisation: The Burden of Perfect Repetition

Adding words to the performance brings up the question, "Do I have to memorize my lines?" Most students express anxiety about whether they will be able to repeat the words they've chosen the same way each time they show their work.

We talk about a performance continuum that runs all the way from total improvisation to rote memorization. We discuss the pros and cons between these two styles. Then, we talk about the virtues of working impromptu. I ask students, "How many of you have your five stage pictures memorized?" Most will say they do. "How many of you know the sentence that goes with each picture?" Again, most will say they do. I tell students to think about their stage pictures and their sentences as the framework for their performance. These pictures are five stations they will stop at each time they travel from the beginning to the end every time they tell their story. "These five moments will stay the same each time you make the performance. They are all you need to memorize." I tell students how they get from one station to the next, what they say and do in between each, can be made up as they go. However, they must make sure that what they make up keeps the story moving in the right direction.

5 Performing

Eventually students ask; "Can I show my work?", "Do you feel ready?" I ask. "Have you figured out everything you want to do from the beginning to the end? Have you shared your story with someone one else in class?"

When there are several who are ready, I tell the class, "Next week we'll share performances. Who wants to volunteer?" I always ask for volunteers. I never force a student to share a performance.

On performance days I remind students, "You are the artist. You can make your performance any way you want. Do you want us to sit proscenium style? Should we sit in the round? Will

you start on-stage, or make an entrance from the wings? You get to choose! You are in total control of the performance."

I call a name from the list of volunteers. The student makes their performance. We sit and watch. After they finish, I thank them for sharing their work. I make a point of telling every student how grateful I am for their willingness to share what they've made.

One year, Trip made a performance about a time she helped her mom make five pies for Thanksgiving dinner. Students offered feedback that went something like this:

> "I saw her make one arm into a circle and move the other arm around really fast."
>
> "What do you think that means?"
>
> "She was mixing something."
>
> "Give a silent thumbs-up if you think that's what Trip was doing."
>
> (Lots of thumbs-up.)
>
> "Do you know what Trip was mixing?"
>
> "Pies."
>
> "Why do you think 'pies'?"
>
> "Because it's in the name of the story!"
>
> (We all laugh.)
>
> "Yes, of course. Did something inside the performance reinforce the idea Trip was making pies"
>
> "She poured it into pans and put it in the oven. It had to be pies, or cakes."

"Give me a thumbs up if you saw Trip put pies in the oven."

We do not, even now, wander into the realm of evaluation. No one, not even the teacher, is allowed to say, "I like this," or "I didn't like that," or "I think they should have..."

We do, however, move to the third area of feedback I mentioned earlier; exploration. Exploration is always initiated, and organized, by the teacher. Part of my job, as the teacher, is to think about questions I can ask that can help us explore moments that already exist in the performance.

> "Trip, I'm curious... was there one pie you liked best?"
>
> "The pumpkin."

> "Keep everything you have. Everything you have is great[2]. Is there something you can you say, or do, something you can add that lets us know pumpkin is your favourite?"

I give Trip some time to imagine. When I see she has an idea I say, "Don't tell us, show us. Start in the middle. Show only the part that lets us know pumpkin is the best."

This is what Trip adds to her performance: after she sets the hot pan on the counter she bends down, smells the pie, and smiles.

"That was great. I appreciate you being brave and sharing something new with us. Audience members, who can describe something new you saw Trip add to her performance?"

6 Summation

Most years it takes us eight weeks to work through this process. The last weeks are devoted entirely to showing work. Most performances last about three minutes. Some are less than a minute. Performance forms vary wildly. Some students make performances that rely heavily on words to communicate the story. Sometimes a performance will be entirely wordless. During these performances, I put side coaching aside. I am a silent observer like everyone else in class.

Occasionally, a student will feel the audience is really with them and, enlivened by the energy flowing between audience and performer, they will add new, unrehearsed material that expands their performance beyond the boundaries of what they'd established during rehearsals. When this happens, I help them keep their performance on track by side coaching with the phrase, "Remember your five sentences. Which one comes next?" Or "How do you get to the end of your story?"

Performance weeks are a joyous time. I call a day filled with students sharing their work A Performance Smorgasbord or A Festival of Performance, or, what it really feels like to me, An Embarrassment of Riches. I am always humbled, and quite moved, by students' willingness to make solo performances, and to allow themselves to be vulnerable in front of their peers in this way.

That's how our process goes. Except for one year. There was a year when the process fell completely apart.

[2] The phrase, "Everything you already have is great. Don't change a thing. Just think about adding. . ." (or something very like it) is one I learned from Frank Galati. I had the privilege of studying with Frank at Northwestern University. That tiny moment of reassurance he offered helped students find the confidence they needed to undertake the vulnerable work of reshaping a performance in front of others

6.1 What Kind of Space?

That year, the first day for performances Gregg told a story about visiting a goat farm, and Saul told us about the time he got separated from his family at an amusement park. The next week, Mateo told an elaborate story about the time his soccer coach didn't believe he was hurt and made him play with a sprained ankle. As I prepared for the third week of performances, I noticed all the volunteers had been boys. I made a note to myself to find a private moment, as students were coming into class, to speak with some of the girls to see who would share their work.

> "Clare, will you share today?"
>
> "I'm not ready."
>
> "I've seen you rehearse. Your performance is great. Would you share a part?"
>
> "Do I have to?"

I got similar responses from all the other girls. I was surprised by their reluctance to share what I'd seen them create. I had been making and sharing performances with these girls since they were in kindergarten. I remembered them as enthusiastic, creative, playful students who were eager to share their work with the class.

We did a vocal warm-up. We gathered ourselves into an audience. "Who wants to share their work?" No one raised their hand.

In all my years of teaching at Buckley I'd never had a day when absolutely no one was ready/able/willing to share; "What's everyone feeling? Do you want more time to rehearse? Do you have questions?" Total silence. Finally, Naomi raised her hand. "I don't feel safe performing in front of the boys."

With that, the floodgates opened. Everyone had something to say. Girls didn't want to perform in front of boys. The boys who hadn't already performed didn't want to perform in front of girls. I reminded them, "You're the artist. You have total control. We can turn out the lights and listen to your words..." Nothing I offered countered their reluctance.

I reminded students of our Classroom Contract. Each year students and I ask ourselves, "What kind of space do we want our room to be?" Most times, students will say they want a space that feels "safe." "Safe," I tell them, means we are not afraid for our physical well-being. I remind them their safety is my number one priority. "Your safety is more important than my teaching," I tell them. Then, I remind them that as important as it is to be physically safe, we

know learning new things means we will need to feel emotionally safe as well. We call a space that supports the kinds of risks necessary for the learning we do in theatre a responsible space.

We brainstorm ideas for what we need to do to be responsible for each other's emotional safety. I keep this list of actions. We refer to it, from time to time, as a way of keeping ourselves accountable for what we are doing in class. This is one such contract:

> Encourage each other.
>
> Be kind.
>
> Don't laugh at each other.
>
> Don't talk to your neighbour while someone is performing.
>
> Watch out for people.
>
> Don't nudge other people if they are not behaving.
>
> Say hello to people.
>
> Pay attention while other people are performing.

"Are we living up to our ideas for a responsible space?" I asked. "Nothing like this has ever happened," I said. "Does anyone have any ideas about how we can move forward?"

Silence.

That week I spoke with the Lower School Principal. I spoke with the fourth-grade homeroom teachers. I spoke with the leaders of the school's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion team. I decided the next week I'd do something I'd never done before: I'd see the boys and girls separately. I'd listen. I'd gather information. And, based on what I learned, I'd see if we could find a way to finish sharing their work.

The next week students shared their feelings.

> "The boys roll their eyes whenever we speak."
>
> "Girls use a secret language. They just look at each other. Without using words, they send each other judgy thoughts about us."
>
> "The boys think we make them lose during P.E."
>
> "The girls just stand there talking and don't even try to catch the ball."
>
> "The boys are too loud. They never let us talk."

I realised the students' insecurities were too deeply interwoven into their school experience to solve in the class sessions we had left for our autobiographical performance process.

I met again with others on the fourth-grade teaching team. We discussed options. We decided I'd hold class, one more time, with boys and girls in separate sections.

6.2 We Try Again: Boys and Girls Divided

The next week, the boys' group came first. I gave them time to warm-up and practice their work. This time, with no girls in the room, they were much more physically and vocally engaged than ever before. They ran around the room. Their voices sang out during vocal warm-ups. The entire room reverberated with their energy. I was thrilled to see them being so fully themselves. At the same time, I thought, "This energy feels crazy. Maybe on the verge of out of control." I understood how someone might be intimidated by the huge wall of energy the boys were creating.

That week, all the boys were eager to share their stories. Their performances were short, mostly silent, high-energy events. There were huge bursts of laugher from the audience. During discussion, everyone had something to share about what they'd seen and heard.

The girls came to class next. I asked if they wanted time to practice their work before sharing. They did. They pulled themselves together into a tight circle of chairs in the far corner of the room. They sat together and began sharing their stories. I recognised my status as "teacher" would have allowed me to cross the room and enter the space they'd created for themselves. However, they'd positioned themselves as far away from me as possible. I was aware, to a degree I'd never realized before, that even though I am a "teacher" I am, also, a "boy." If boys were making them nervous, I didn't want to add to the problem. I stayed where I was. I sat on the floor, in the corner, and watched what happened.

The girls began telling each other their stories. One spoke for a while. Then, she fell silent. Another began her story. A third shared part of hers. I was far enough away I couldn't make out what was being said. But I could tell from their body language, from the tone of their voices, from the expressions on their faces they were, each of them, fully engaged in performing, and fully committed to supporting one another.

I heard laughter. I saw smiles on their faces. Sometimes, one of them would stand up and take on the role of a supporting character in another's story. When this happened, the performers would improvise dialogue and staging. Students who had already spoken jumped back in; picking up their story where they'd left off, moving their narrative forward, then passing the space off to someone else.

Eventually, I stood up.

"Our time is almost over. How can you bring what you're making to an end?"

> "We didn't show you our stories," one of them said.
>
> "I saw you telling each other your stories. How do you think it went?"
>
> They told me, "It went great."
>
> "That's good enough," I said.

I end with this description of the rupture that occurred in my classroom as a reminder there is always more going on in the classroom than teachers recognise. I thought about the distinction we make between an "interpretation" and an "observation" when we offer feedback on each other's performance. The students and I had seen many of the same behaviours. We'd made similar observations: a look, a laugh, someone moving to a new chair. However, my interpretation of these behaviours was radically different from theirs. Even though I check-in with students to see how they are doing, and I believe I can read the tenor of a classroom accurately, I totally missed the discomfort so many in this class were feeling.

That second week, after the students shared their work, the boys in their way and the girls in theirs, I was feeling good with how the unit ended. It was not what I had imagined at the outset. But, I thought, I'd found a structure that allowed students to feel they were freely themselves as they made and shared their performances.

I stood in the doorway and heard the girls laughing as they walked down the hall. As I stepped back into my classroom, I saw one of the girls waiting inside; "Are we going to be in the same groups again next week?" she asked.

"No," I told her, "This was the end of our autobiographies. Next week we'll be all together and start something new."

"Good," she said, "because if we were, I was going to ask if I could come with the boys."

This student's desire to "come with the boys" was a total surprise. I interpreted what students told me during our discussions to mean their vulnerabilities were organised, solely, around boys versus girls. I'd failed to recognise, or imagine, there might be students whose responses were more nuanced than this binary construct allows. Her acknowledgement that she would have felt more comfortable attending class with the boys made me realise I should have allowed students to choose which of the two groups they would join.

And, I realise, creating groups not organised around gender might have allowed students to understand their discomfort was not rooted (only) in gender but in ways of behaving that are connected to other aspects of their intersectional lives.

One of the great things about teaching is the work is never done.

There is always more to risk.

There is always more to learn.

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