

National Day of Listening Comes to Midland, Michigan: A StoryCorps Project

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It was almost serendipitous that as I was contemplating doing a project on community with my sixth graders in Bullock Creek Middle School, I received an e-mail from a StoryCorps representative looking for teachers interested in participating in the National Day of Listening. StoryCorps is a non-profit organization whose mission is to provide Americans of all backgrounds and beliefs with the opportunity to record, share, and preserve the stories of our lives.¹ The organization initiated The National Day of Listening in 2008 as a new national holiday, celebrated on the day after Thanksgiving, to encourage all Americans to record an interview with someone important to them.² Already familiar with StoryCorps from my morning commute (with my radio tuned to NPR—National Public Radio), I knew that this would be a perfect vehicle to launch a new oral history project. I was eager to give my sixth grade students an opportunity to simply sit down with another person (or two, or three) and listen carefully.

An Interdisciplinary Project

My colleagues and I (English, social studies and reading teachers) were already planning to have our students write letters to people serving in the military and learn about their experiences and the places where they were serving (Afghanistan, Iraq, Kuwait). So it seemed natural that the focus of our StoryCorps project would be veterans. Our superintendent put me in touch with a local Veterans Services representative who worked very hard to gather military veterans and those still serving to visit our school.

In preparation for Bullock Creek's National Day of Listening, we focused on non-fiction texts in our classes. We also analyzed the structure of interviews and practiced techniques for conducting them successfully.³ There were many resources on the StoryCorps National Day of Listening website, including sample questions and video excerpts of past interviews that aided us in the planning process. In addition, we used excerpts from the book *Listening is an Act of Love: A Celebration of American Life from the StoryCorps Project* to help students understand

why it is important to celebrate the human experience.⁴ Our students found two chapters, "The Story of StoryCorps" and "Favorite StoryCorps Questions" particularly helpful in creating their own questions and conducting the interviews.

Geography

The English teacher on our team had students write letters to soldiers currently serving in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Kuwait. As it turned out, one of our student's fathers was stationed in Afghanistan at the time. The students were eager to send letters to him and his unit. Meanwhile, the sixth grade social studies teacher developed a lesson plan using maps and the interactive textbook *Geography Alive!* to help students become familiar with the geography of the area where their letters were being sent. Several soldiers wrote back; one actually sent gifts and met a student and her family in person.

As we made plans for our National Day of Listening, we called on the district media specialist to provide us with computer resources (including Skype) and to instruct us in the use of recording technology so the stories could be heard for years to come. We also invited a local reporter to attend Bullock Creek's National Day of Listening.

We enlisted the help of parents. Some parents were veterans themselves, or had contact with other potential volunteers. The mother of the student whose father was serving in Afghanistan was particularly helpful, monitoring interviews, trouble-shooting any technical difficulties, and helping set up the Skype interview with the soldier stationed in Afghanistan.

In the Field

On November 17, 2010, the big day, students interviewed military veterans and those still serving. Because the actual National Day of Listening occurs over the Thanksgiving holiday break, we opted to observe it a few days earlier.

After checking into the main office, volunteers gathered in the school library and helped themselves to bagels, fruit, and coffee. Volunteers were also provided with an explanation of



the National Day of Listening and StoryCorps, as well as the agenda for the morning. Interview stations with a computer and microphone were set up in the library, empty classrooms, and the cafeteria. In groups of two or three, students interviewed our fourteen volunteers.

I circulated from “studio to studio,” listening in on different interviews. Students came to the interview prepared with a list of questions inspired by their own thoughts and curiosity, as well as from the book *Listening is an Act of Love*. While I encouraged students to be thoughtful and creative in asking questions, I also cautioned them not to dwell on a question if volunteers appeared to be uncomfortable as they responded.

Initially, students asked basic questions like “Why did you join the military?” or “What were your sleeping quarters like?” As the interviews progressed, students started to ask questions like, “What were you most afraid of?” One veteran simply, yet profoundly responded: “I was afraid of making mistakes.” When asked what it was like being home after experiencing combat, one veteran said, “Coming home after all the confusion and action of the war was hard. ...It was hard sitting down to just watch T.V.” The only female veteran, a Marine, was asked about her proudest moment. She stated, “I raced ten men and beat five of them who [had earlier] tried to talk me down and tell me I could not beat them.”

Wise Advice

One volunteer had been a World War II prisoner of war. Although the narrative of his escape from his German awed his young listeners, the speaker was more concerned with providing this advice to his audience: “Education, education, education!” He acknowledged that it was probably interesting for the students to learn about military strategy and weaponry, but for him, when the war was over, it wasn’t these things that helped him get a job or support his family—it was a college education. (The federal “G.I. Bill” paid the college tuition of returning veterans, allowing many young men to become the first in their family to receive a higher education, creating a large middle class, and raising the rank of the United States to

that of the “most highly educated nation” in the 1950s.⁵) The volunteer even pulled me aside between interviews, wanting to make sure I was “teaching these kids how to write,” as he felt it was a lost art. “Nobody writes letters anymore,” he lamented. I made sure students sent hand-written thank you notes to the participants.

Other visitors to our classroom shared their memories of their service in the Korean, Vietnam, and the Gulf Wars, peacetime military experiences, and current conflicts. Two students were able to interview a soldier stationed in Afghanistan via Skype. This was particularly memorable because we could talk to and see someone in Afghanistan while sitting in a classroom in Midland, Michigan.

Reflection

Our National Day of Listening took place on a Wednesday. To close the week, I reserved class time for students to share what they had learned from volunteers. Students commented that the volunteers were regular people who were kind, funny, and reminded them of other people they knew. Students found commonalities with many of the veterans, especially with regard to the importance of family in their lives. While we had all been a bit nervous going into the project, when reflecting on the day, students expressed pride for successfully conducting the interviews. We were able to listen to some of the recordings as a class. One student had asked such insightful questions in a professional tone, I suggested that he could consider a career in broadcasting or journalism. He blushed, but I could see the twinkle in his eye.

Some students were surprised by the emotional responses engendered by certain questions. One student explained how hard it was for his volunteer to discuss the loss of friends in war. Together, we compared these responses to the Storycorps interviews we had listened to, prior to conducting our own interviews. We thought back to the difficult story that Joseph Robertson shared with his son of killing a German soldier during WWII. We discussed how intense and, perhaps, cathartic it can be for veterans to recall their wartime experiences. Words like



“hero” and “inspiration” came up often in our discussion, and students were genuinely impressed with the efforts, dedication, and sacrifices made by the service men and women.

Writing about Truisms

Before students left for Thanksgiving break, I introduced a culminating assignment that required students to gather their interview notes, reflect on their experiences and write a “Truism” essay, in which students explore universal truths through personal connections. The book *Reviving the Essay* by Gretchen Bernabei is an excellent resource for crafting these essays.⁶

To introduce the Truism essay assignment, I asked students to define the word “truism,” either from their own knowledge or by consulting a dictionary. Ultimately, students came to understand that a truism is a statement that is true to almost everyone. For instance, I pointed out that “Ms. Burke loves spinach” is not a truism but a personal truth, but “Everyone has likes and dislikes” is a truism—something that is true of everyone. Once this concept was understood, over the course of the next two class periods, I followed Bernabei’s procedure to create truisms.

To help students internalize the concept of a truism, we used examples unrelated to their interview project. Students examined photos and wrote truisms that applied not only to the images in front of them, but to personal experience as well. For example, while studying a picture of a rollercoaster, one student wrote, “Life is twisty.” When students had a handle on how truisms

work and can be created, we turned our attention back to their National Day of Listening experience.

In the essay assignment, students were to use a truism as their thesis, and then supply evidence (primary source quotes from their interviews) to support the truism. One student based his essay on the truism, “Difficulty overcome is confidence earned.” The student discussed the challenges faced by the veteran he interviewed and concluded his essay with this thought: “I think many of us could not do many of the things that we do without confidence. I think I understand the lives of veterans and regular people who face difficult things just a little better.”

From Another’s Point of View

One girl stated as the thesis of her essay, “It’s not all about you.” She recalled the story of Mrs. Keenan, whose military duty during Vietnam included working in a stateside factory making products that the soldiers needed. This student noted Mrs. Keenan’s pride in the fact that she was part of something larger than herself:

While she was working with hundreds of people, she realize that it wasn’t all about her.... She worked with civilians, men, women, and they worked until they reached their goal for the day. Sometimes they worked from 9 am to 6 pm, sometimes when they got called in, sometimes all day. It was a 24/7 job and you have to be ready to be called in, even if it



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was in the middle of the night and you were still in your pajamas.

Just like in the war zone, it’s not all about you. You are a small part of a very big team, and if you all work together, you will get it done faster. If all the workers worked together, whether they were in South Carolina, North Carolina, or Georgia, they could get their job done faster, then they could ship out all the supplies, and the soldiers could come home to their families a little bit sooner than expected.

One of the goals that I had when I began this project was for students to explore their community. It turned into so much more. The collaboration of students, staff, faculty, parents, and veterans fostered a deeper sense of community and created a lasting record of the contributions and experiences of local veterans. While our project focused on those who served in the military, The National Day of Listening provides an opportunity for people from all walks of life to share their experiences and their stories and, then, for students to think deeply about the meanings of those stories. We were all richer for taking the time to listen. 🌐

Notes

1. StoryCorps, “StoryCorps” (Brooklyn: 2010), www.storycorps.org. Teachers should be aware that not every story is appropriate for a younger audience. For example, some narrations graphically relate the violence that occurs during war or struggles for civil rights or labor rights.
2. “StoryCorps National Day of Listening” (Brooklyn: 2010), nationaldayoflistening.org/participate.
3. Dave Isay, *Listening is an Act of Love: A Celebration of American Life from the StoryCorps Project* (New York: Penguin Press, 2007).
4. Kathryn Walbert, “How to Do It: Oral History Projects,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* (March/April 2004): P1-P8.
5. Walter F. Mondale, *The Good Fight: A Life in Liberal Politics* (New York: Scribner, 2010), 341.
6. Gretchen Bernabei, *Reviving the Essay* (Shoreham, VT: Discover Writing Press, 2005). This book is a free PDF at www.discoverwriting.com/reviving-the-essay.pdf.

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