Stories and the Teaching Life

TIM GILLESPIE

"In my teaching notebook... I can mull over the day's challenges, savor small victories, tinker with problems, initiate small disturbances of thought, and gain a bit of perspective on the daily triumphs and despairs of teaching."

During my teacher-training internship many years ago, I was assigned to do some small bit of what was then called "systematic self-observation" and what today we might label "teacher research." I dutifully kept a notebook on a couple of activities I was trying and mulled over—in writing—why they soared or flopped. Then I finished the educational course I needed to get my high school certificate, started teaching, and forgot most of whatever I'd learned.

However, one thing that did last, through some alchemy of time and necessity, was the routine of keeping a notebook in which I'd regularly write about my teaching. The assignment to do teacher research became a habit. And this ongoing habit of reflection, I think, has been one of the factors that has kept me teaching—and generally happily so—for twenty-nine years.

Many nights—or at least those few nights when I don't have papers to read, lessons to plan, civic duties to discharge, or fatherly pleasures to engage in—I'm writing about my teaching in what I still call my teaching notebook. With the evening's distance and the quiet plink of the keyboard, I can mull over the day's challenges, savor small victories, tinker with problems, initiate small disturbances of thought, and gain a bit of perspective on the daily triumphs and despairs of teaching. The classroom is the site of my public account as a teacher; the notebook is the site for my personal account, a refuge for articulating and revising my teaching life.

Over the years, this personal narrative of my teaching career has become increasingly important to me, and I've become more committed to sharing my musings with fellow teachers, mostly in the hope of hearing good classroom tales and lore in return. We teachers need to tell our stories, because true classroom narratives offer an important alternative to other prevalent modes of discourse about school life. There are competing narratives out there about this profession of ours that are dangerous, and our classroom stories resist and complicate them. Let me mention three of those narratives about teaching that worry me. For lack of better words, I'll call one the narrative of abstraction, one the narrative of heroism, and one the narrative of complaint.

The Narrative of Abstraction

The narrative of abstraction is my shorthand for much of the public discourse about schools that takes place on the editorial pages, the talk-radio airwaves, the TV news, and in the voters' pamphlet, all using the language of policies, standards, fiscal constraints, reforms, performance testing, and so forth. These public conversations are too often abstract and remote from the actual primary site of education, the classroom. Such abstractions are easily ignored or neglected. Every educational issue should have real children's names and faces attached to it; otherwise, damage may be done to those children. Our classroom stories offer those names and faces.
Let me offer an entry from my notebook from two years ago about one of my students—a senior at the time—whom I’ll call Mickey. Way back when Mickey was in second grade, he got hit by a car and sustained a massive head injury that put him in a coma for two-and-a-half months. Luckily, he lived, but this traumatic brain injury, or TBI, causes him to suffer from the permanent condition of ataxia, which means he has had trouble ever since he was seven controlling his muscles and body movements, even his vocal cords. He walks with a jerky-gait and talks in a slow vibrato and shakes so much he can’t write (though he can compose with laborious slowness on a special keyboard he has at home). He’s also very bright. For many years, the school district has hired a special assistant who accompanies him to class to help him with any written work. Here is a passage from my notebook about Mickey:

October 1999

It’s Homecoming Week. Every day the students are invited to dress a different way to cultivate “school spirit.”

Monday is Wear School Colors Day, Tuesday is Twins Day, and this day is Grunge Day or Raggedy Bum Day or something like that; I confess I don’t always pay close enough attention to this stuff. In any case, we’re working with the novel Siddhartha in first period. During our book chat, I notice Mickey pulling awkwardly at a tear in the knee of his jeans. It looks like he’s trying to make the tear larger. Toward the end of the period, Lynn (Mickey’s educational assistant) has to leave. While the students are reading silently, I amble over to him; he is still ripping at the hole in his pants leg.

“What are you doing, Mickey?” I ask.

“I… I’m… going… to… tear… my… pants… legs… off,” he says. “For… spirit… day.”

“Oh.” All right, I think. I support school spirit.

I leave him and circulate to chat with different students, but when I come back around again to his table, he’s still yanking at his jeans.

“Do… you… have… any… scissors… Mr. Gillespie?” Mickey says, just as Meaghan asks me to come over to talk to her table about some questions she has on the novel, and David raises his hand wanting clarification on the project for next week, and Sarah says from her corner she’s sick of this Siddhartha guy and his self-absorption.


A couple of minutes later, sitting with Meaghan’s group, I notice out of the corner of my eye students at Mickey’s table slowly pulling away.

“Uh, Mr. Gillespie,” whispers Julie. “I think Mickey might need a little help there.”

I look over. Mickey has the big, sharp teacher scissors, and he’s stabbing the air wildly as he tries to get a bead on his pants leg. Oh my gosh, what on earth was I thinking? But Nathan—cool guy, soccer star—saves the day.

“Mickey,” he says. “You want a little help?”

“Sure,” Mickey says, looking a bit sheepish, but definitely bemused.

Nathan squats down on the floor, takes the scissors, and starts to cut at the stiff denim. He gets halfway around Mickey’s leg but gets stuck at the thick seam. Amy tries to help him out by pulling the pant leg taut. I walk over and tell Nathan and Amy they can get back to reading their novels, and I’ll give it a go for a while. Mickey thinks this is funny.

So I end up on my knees, scissoring off the rest of Mickey’s pant legs so he can have raggedy cut-offs and be part of Grunge Day, or whatever it is.

Then it’s almost time for the bell to ring, and students start to gather their eighty-pound backpacks to leave, and Julie gets the last word. “So, Mr. G.,” she says. “Mickey will have something to say when he goes home tonight. It’s not every day your English teacher cuts off your pants.”

The bell rings and the class ends with this beautiful laughter from Mickey and his classmates and me.

End of notebook entry. But here’s what it helps me say more clearly; Who can measure the value of Mickey’s presence in my class? Who can talk about Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Act, without following Mickey around the last ten years? Who can tell me Mickey’s personal assistant isn’t worth the huge cost to society? What bland figures can assess what it means to Mickey to be included? What abstract cost-benefit analysis can measure what we have all learned from Mickey, the occasions for generosity and patience—and most of the time just normalness—his presence has offered? What’s the worth of any policy that can’t
Stories and the Teaching Life

accommodate the lovely, long-lasting echo of that laughter?

Public discourse about schools needs our classroom stories to animate—to breathe life into—the too-often abstract narrative of educational policy.

The Narrative of Heroism

There's a second narrative of teaching that I think holds some dangers, and that's what I'll call the narrative of heroism. Tom Newkirk has talked about the “relentlessly optimistic” tone of lots of published writing about school: the accounts of foolproof methods, unqualified successes, great classroom triumphs.

The bestseller shelves and movie screens have been filled for the whole course of my teaching career with this heroic narrative whose story line is basically, “How I went into a rotten school with venal administrators and lazy colleagues and predatory students and by the application of my special skills and insights and heroic commitment—all by myself, of course, supported by no one else, no community of fellow teachers or parents—turned things around and then saved the world . . . oh, and then probably got fired.” This is the John Wayne genre of the educational story: lone hero rides into town and single-handedly slays all the bad guys. You can easily name the films that enact some version of this narrative: To Sir With Love, Stand and Deliver, Lean On Me, Dead Poets Society, Mr. Holland's Opus, Dangerous Minds, and on and on.

Certainly, as teachers, we need inspirational stories—stories of hope and success in the classroom. In fact, I have liked most of these films. But what they convey to the general public is that educational success is more a matter of the dedicated individual

Now, five years later, Shannon has written an essay about her mom.

I ask her to read the draft to me, but she says she'd rather I read it quietly and hands over the pages. I ask first what she's trying to get across, and she says, “All I really want is people not to feel sorry for me. I want to talk about what I learned from my mom when she died, but the last thing in the world I want is for anyone to pity me. I just can't stand that. If it seems like I'm exploiting my mom to get into any college, I'm not going to write about her at all.”

So I read, and I'm stunned to silence by Shannon's eloquent exploration of her complex feelings. Part of the essay is vexation at people who tiptoe or dance away when she wants to talk about her mother. Part of the essay is just bone-deep loss at feeling orphaned. Part of it is fear that she won't remember everything about her mother. Part of it is anger at her mother for being so absorbed in her teaching career and cheating Shannon out of their short time together, combined with admiration for her mother's commitment to teaching. Shannon thinks she wants to be a teacher, too. These powerful emotions, heartfelt, sometimes contradictory, none mawkish or clichéd, are packed, line by line, into two pages of essay. As an authentic account of a heart's burdens and confusions, it is eloquent. As an essay to get into college, it jumps around, rambles, and needs a central focus.

But that's not what I'm mostly thinking about. I can hardly speak when I'm finished. My eyes get watery because I
feel so strongly Shannon’s loss, and she’s sitting here in front of me, and she’s such a great kid. “I don’t know exactly what to tell you, Shannon,” I say, “I’m so moved by . . . you know, by your mom’s death.” I don’t want to be a tip-toe, but in the face of this tragic event in Shannon’s life, it’s too hard for me to distance the words on the page, to coldly critique or give advice. I want to connect to the writer, not correct the writing. She realizes this.

“Mr. Gillespie,” Shannon tells me in what I recognize as a schoolteacher’s tone of voice. “What I need for you to do is not worry about that, but to tell me what it’s like as a piece of writing. I want this to get me into college, so you have to be tough and objective here.” My sweet seventeen-year-old student is trying to get me to be less sentimental.

So we start to talk, and I stumble, still uncomfortable with the situation. I try to articulate how I think she packs too many different thoughts into the essay and how it could use a clearer focal point. But other problems elude my ability to express. Later, I can more clearly see what I needed to tell her. In her strong-willed effort not to be pitied, she comes across as colder than she truly is. The anger is amped up in the essay and the compassion turned down, so it’s an unbalanced self-portrait; I don’t think it captures Shannon’s whole essence. But though it’s easy to say things so efficiently here in the evening at my writing desk, the actual conversation was halting, awkward. Talking with Shannon, I was unsure and chattered too much, circling around things. The problem in my response was not one of conception or articulation, I think now, but one of feeling. I just could not bring myself to be too critical of the essay. I didn’t want to be tough or objective. In the face of real, consequential, to-the-bone writing, I lost heart. I couldn’t do what Shannon was asking me to do—say why I thought the essay didn’t quite work. Shannon listened, asked questions, made a few notes, but was clearly confused about the obvious gap between what I was trying to say and what must have been on my face. She was frustrated. I was frustrated with myself. She left with a look of consternation on her face.

Next day, I see Shannon in the hall. “Shannon,” I tell her, “I feel bad about our writing conference. I don’t think it was very helpful to you. I’m sorry I wasn’t clearer about my responses and suggestions.”

“Well,” she says, “It got me thinking. Something wasn’t working in the essay. I started thinking that I hadn’t talked enough about the things that I loved about my mom, the gifts she left me that would help a reader understand the other feelings, too. So I made that my main point and actually I’m feeling pretty good about my rewrite. So don’t worry, I got what I needed.”

Maybe part of Shannon’s mother’s legacy is generosity of spirit. Shannon has forgiven me for my failings and used them to help find her own way.

End of story, but not quite. That spring, Shannon surprised me by mentioning positively the time we’d spent on her essay about her mother those many months before. What I mostly remembered and had written about in my notebook was my sense of great insufficiency. But she remembered only that we’d tried to figure out for a half hour one day a way to stumble together toward an understanding of ourselves and each other. We reserve the word “unspeakable” for that which is excruciatingly painful or excruciatingly beautiful, and Shannon’s essay on her mother had both qualities in abundance. She was trying to bring true words to an unspeakable experience. There’s no lesson plan for that; nothing smaller than the whole world is suited for such a life-long quest to understand. And, some days, maybe the best we can do is walk with our students for a few steps on their quests, allow ourselves to listen to their confusion, and share ours.

I’m glad I wrote down this account of an inferior writing conference. The story reminds me that the narrative of heroism offers grand gestures when most of our successful work is really made up of small, halting moments of grace and connection.

The Narrative of Complaint

There’s one final narrative I want to counteract with my notebook of classroom stories, the narrative of complaint. This is a pervasive, insidious discourse that comes from teachers ourselves. No one can deny that this work we do is bone-achingly hard, the constraints too often absurd, the obstacles to success formidable. Public bashings, institutional follies, and punky kids assail us daily. We have plenty to complain about. But even though there’s something seductive about joining that back row of sneerers at the faculty meeting, or that table in the lunchroom where the dominant topic is griping about students, I have to resist. I just don’t want to become one of those embittered teachers, bad-mouthing kids, the kids’ parents, administrators, the world. It’s too demoralizing and
Stories and the Teaching Life

drives me away from my original purposes for joining this profession.

So I need a backlog of stories to counterbalance the difficulties of the work. By my habit of writing about my teaching, I can’t falsely magnify the stories of frustrations and failures; rather, they’re in there along with the stories of joys, insights, small victories, and pleasures. Let me finish by sharing two more brief excerpts from my teaching notebook, both moments of goofy delight and surprise.

October 1999

Early this morning, I was helping to judge the Homecoming float-building contest in the school parking lot. Kids had stayed up all night building their class floats. Neda and her friend Theresa, both student council members, both students of mine, were taking a break from their supervisory duties, sitting in the open door of a Volkswagen van, taking turns reading a book out loud together, it appeared. They called me over.

“Mr. Gillespie, Mr. Gillespie,” they yelled. “You’ve got to see us!”

I strolled over. “Hey!”

Theresa said, “We just thought it would warm your heart—you know, being of the Baby Boom generation and all—to see some of your students sitting in a VW van reading a Kurt Vonnegut novel.”

And then we all giggled hysterically.

March 2000

Eighth period, my prep period, walking out into the parking lot behind the building to grab a cardboard box of essays from my car, a small movement drew my attention. Three boys were tucked around a corner outside the science wing, almost invisible. They were all facing the wall, clustered close. I detoured from my car and angled their way. What’re they doing? I wondered. The scene had the look of mischief. They weren’t hearing me approach. Probably smoking ciggies or grass, I thought. But as I got closer and saw from behind their odd postures—heads down, arms held in front—I thought, oh man, they’re urinating together on some spot on the ground. Brother! If this doesn’t take all.

“Okay,” I barked in full authoritarian teacher voice. “What are you guys doing there?”

They didn’t jump in fright or guilt, zip up quickly or flail any incriminating butts away. They just turned and looked at me. I noticed that one had a garden trowel in his hand and that a little cross made of popsicle sticks with bits of colored paper fluttering from it was stuck into the ground. “We’re just burying a fish,” one said.

Say what?

Just then Kerry the science teacher stuck her head out a window. She must have heard me bellowing. “They volunteered to help me with a small ceremony. We lost one of the fish in our aquarium today.”

“Yeah,” said one of the students in mock gravitas. “The little guy gave himself for our education.”

And mine, too. I could have added. So, embarrassed by my assumptions, I joined the circle, and we all thought hard about the little fish.

The stories I write down have been my counter-narrative to modes of discourse about teaching I see as dangerous. The narratives of abstraction, heroism, and complaint all have a lot of power in the public sphere. So when I do my own teacher research, when I write in my notebook, and then when I tell and share my classroom stories publicly, I hope I’m doing a little bit to make the story of education in the civic arena slightly more concrete, realistic, and student centered.

But the most pernicious power of those negative narratives about teaching may be in the personal sphere, in the arena of the teacher’s heart. So when I write about my teaching, I’m seeking perspective by keeping my own story of this intense work in all its sorrow and joy, challenge and success. This unvarnished account of my work helps keep me going as a teacher, the habit of writing having become a small ceremony of gratitude for a life of teaching.

Tim Gillespie teaches senior English, advanced placement English, and interdisciplinary studies at Lake Oswego High School, just outside of Portland, Oregon. Now in his twenty-ninth year as a teacher, he has taught fifth grade, eighth grade, and various high school assignments, from alternative school to journalism. Gillespie is a past president of the Oregon Council of Teachers of English and is affiliated with the Oregon Writing Project at Lewis & Clark College.