

If Life Were a Movie, How Would You Write It?

The life is so short, the craft so long to learn.

—Chaucer

We're halfway through the semester already, and Nico's writing is a wreck. The Edmund Fitzgerald. The Hesperus. You know what I mean. Time is short in teaching; the craft so hard to teach. Nico is all sweetness and good intentions, but on the page: *I was nervous*. You mean nervous, right? *Yes, nervous*. In English, it is nervous. *Oh. So much the same*. Yes.

Last week he wrote in his notebook:

My hule high school life; I have never read a book to start to finish, but sence I have hade ms kittles writing class, I have read 3 books in about Tues and half month. She wauld make us read ten min in class and 20 min at home for homework. Ms kittle has found the book that I have read. I dont know what im going to do when I dont have her as a techer. I am so glad that she is my teacher because now I like to read and if she dind show that to me I probaly would never have read again. so thanks ms kittle.

Where to start? I must lead him to write with power and with control over conventions. In English. This week he's telling a story of snowmobiling and how he's built a jump with plywood and packed snow. *I jumped 68 feet this weekend*, he tells me. What? How? *You don't believe me?* I've just never seen it and worry about your head. He chuckles, *We wear helmets*.

We're deep in a north country winter with a boy who moved here just four years ago from an island off the coast of Spain. He'd never seen

snow; now he packs it with his large, black gloves and checks the temperature to see how well it's setting. A jump day begins with wet snow, and temps around 30. But our valley can hover at 0, so once the jump is built, it will be immovable. It's a launching pad for what boys dream of: flight.

But words on the page when you're an English Language Learner, they just don't cooperate. Kind of like building a jump with the grainy powder that swirls and blows at the end of a Nor'easter in late January: gritty like sand, it piles up in your glove and collapses. Nico is all confidence with snowmobiling. He knows the best sleds and the horsepower, range, and durability of each. This is a second language for me—I stop him repeatedly for definitions and explanations. I've never been on a snow machine; he can't believe the gaps in my education. *I'll take you*, he smiles. I'm not sure I want to learn that badly, I say.

His snowmobiling story is a response to an assignment that I call a compressed autobiography. First we spend time zooming in on every detail, then I teach students the zooming past strategy writers use to leap forward in time. Combine the two, and the span of a life can be shown on one page with enough detail to keep it interesting. The students choose the frame: tell your life story through something you value, like trips to Fenway to watch the Red Sox, or Thanksgiving at Grandma's house. I show them my childhood through bike riding, then tennis—how the scenes change with the frame I choose to share. Our room fills with their ideas: my life in hair, in shoes, at camp. There is so much to write about.

But here's the catch: over the last two years, I've been adding some lessons on composing on

video to my workshop. As you write, you also produce a movie—composing in text, image, and music. You may work on one or the other during workshop at your own pace, but both products are due on the same day. You see, I think there's a power in movie-making. I've been searching for ways to enflame students with a desire to write and wondering how composing off the page might help those who struggle with words to gain confidence and interest in their work. For students like Nico, creating the movie helps him see the details of what he wants to show before spelling, punctuation, and translating thinking to English overwhelms him.

Nico put his whole self into the project each day, co-producing (with his snow-riding partner Tom) a video that entertains, informs, and impresses our class. He sees the images lined up in his head with clarity and organization before he begins stacking his words line upon line, from the Spanish-English dictionary and back again, fighting through when a single sentence can take several minutes and a story can be lost in the process. Tom and Nico organize their movie into tricks, like jumping and riding backwards, then trail riding, then views from the top of the mountains they climb, the *real* reason to trail ride, they tell me. Over several days, they cut and edit, organizing their key ideas. They toss details that don't belong—like getting a speeding ticket from the New Hampshire Trail Warden one afternoon, which was totally unfair and they're going to fight it—because it doesn't fit with the rest of the movie. As they organize each clip of video footage they shot over the weekend, I listen in on their process. *No, wait, we should put the building of the jump here, then the shots of how far we go. Yeah, then this one, the crash. Yeah, put the crash last. No, put that road jump last so it shows our best jump. Put the crash before to show the danger and make it suspenseful. Yeah, a deep chuckle, danger.*

We write in notebooks at the start of class the next day: take one part of your movie and craft that scene into words, I say. Use all of your skills as a writer to make that image live on the page. Nico's pen moves line to line, a sprint from frame to frame in his head. He buddies up with Tom moments later and they swap notebooks. *Listen Ms. Kittle: the snow sprays in my face and I can't see when I hit the jump but I feel the air all around me like I'm flying. Details like that, right?*

Yes, exactly, I say.

The movie projects engage my students with composition, and engagement is everything, of course. There is an inseparable link in brain research between understanding and motivation, and confidence and competence significantly affect motivation. (Jackson & Cooper). I need all four of those variables to rock in my room or students with significant literacy challenges won't try for long. Each time Nico and Tom revise their movie, they revise their understanding of writing. How we tell a story, how we persuade, how we ride snow machines to the clearing at the top of South Moat Mountain: when they compose it in video first, the words unfold.

In one semester, I must engage Nico with telling his stories and expressing his ideas, so he can manipulate a language he's only just begun to know. The days are short in the dark silence of winter. There isn't enough time, and there's so much to learn. But time is all I have. I tell myself each day to use it wisely.

Reference

- Jackson, Y., & Cooper, E. J. (2007). Building academic success with underachieving adolescents. In K. Beers, B. Probst, & L. Rief (Eds.), *Adolescent literacy: Turning promise into practice* (pp. 243–256). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.