




# Writing from the Heart

*Challenged by a classroom full of silent, angry, and disengaged students, a teacher makes a promise and ignites student learning.*

**Jyothi Bathina**



**W**hen I was hired to teach at-risk students in the poverty-stricken, gang-infested former murder capital East Palo Alto, California, I wasn't worried. After all, I had just returned from the South Bronx, New York, where I had taught high school juniors who lived in the constant shadow of poverty, crime, drugs, and violence. So I walked into my first class of the day, with confidence that I could successfully teach these students living in the sunny Bay Area.

I immediately launched into my welcome speech, full of enthusiasm and personal anecdotes, sharing

my story with my students to make them see me as a person and to begin the process of sharing and trusting one another. The class of 17 juniors stared back at me, unresponsive. Unlike my students in the Bronx, a mix of black, Dominican, and Puerto Rican adolescents who had come in swearing, jostling, and shoving, these students, almost all Latino, were quiet, seemingly respectful, never leaving their seats or uttering a profanity in class. When the bell rang, I watched them quietly file out. I was puzzled by this new behavior, unsure how to proceed.

Loud, I could handle. Rebellious, I could handle. After all, loudness indicated a need to be heard, and rebellion indicated a willingness to actively resist. Both of those openings enabled me to foster student voice and debate, thus encouraging learning. But this silence, this passive refusal to interact—and, more important, to learn—was shocking and painful. Still, I kept trying. For nearly a week, I kept at it, coming in every day with new materials, new ideas to break the ice, all to no avail. There were no questions, no responses, no raised hands. I stood alone at the front of the room, clearly an uninvited guest to be tolerated until the bell rang.

After a week, the rejection was getting to me. I spent time reading about the area, trying to understand where my students were coming from and what their backgrounds were. East Palo Alto, I learned, is considered the “servants’ quarters” to the affluent city of Palo Alto, where Stanford University is based. Palo Alto is home to distinguished faculty, professionals, and wealthy businesspeople; East Palo Alto is where their “help”—the maids, cooks, gardeners, and laborers—live, often in run-down tenements and substandard housing, surrounded by rampant crime and violence.

My students were the children of this community, growing up silent, resentful, angry, and often violent. In the 1990s, youth-on-youth murder was at an all-time high, leading to East Palo Alto’s notoriety as the murder capital of the United States. By the time I got there in 2006, things had improved only slightly.

### A Promise Made

When I went back to school on Monday, I had a better understanding of why my students were disengaged, but I still had no clear idea of how to break the silence and engage them. As a last resort, I pulled out my copy of *Drown* (Riverhead, 1997), a collection of short stories by Junot Díaz that never failed to engage my former students in both East Side San Jose and the South Bronx. Because my students chose to remain silent, I reasoned, I would read them a story and let them listen instead. The story I chose was “How to Date a Black Girl, Brown Girl, White Girl, Halfie.” It’s a brilliant story written in the voice of a young Dominican boy living in New Jersey. He talks about government cheese, goats in the *campo*, and his nemesis, a Puerto Rican kid named Howie who likes to kill cats.

The story took a good 10 minutes to read aloud and when I finished, I was afraid to look up. There had been no murmurs while I read, no laughter at the funny parts, no response whatsoever. Disappointed that my final ploy to get my students interested had failed miserably, I finally lifted my gaze.

To my utter shock, the young men who sat in the back row, usually sprawled in their seats, were now on their feet. I wasn’t sure what to think, wondering in a panic if my storytelling had finally pushed them over the edge and they were getting up to leave. Instead, Angel, a student with a knife scar zigzagging

across his face from his forehead to his chin, stepped forward and with a broad motion began to clap his hands. The others joined him in resounding applause, and I stood there amazed at their response. Afraid to break the spell, I ventured to ask, “You like that, Angel?” He nodded his head vigorously, emboldening me to ask a follow-up question. “What do you like about it?”

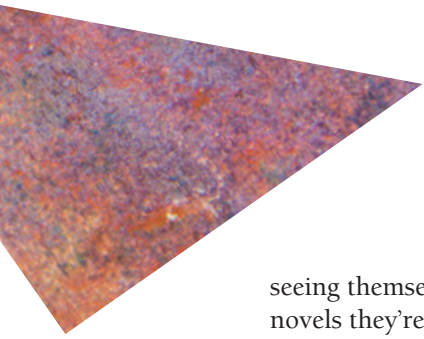
Angel took a step forward, pointed at the book, and said emphatically, “That @#\$% is for real, Miss!” The others immediately broke out in a chorus of approval, the boys as well as the girls.

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Pleased beyond belief that I had finally made some headway, I was eager to keep the momentum going. I explained that the author was Junot Díaz, who was a professor at MIT, and that the book was a big success.

The students had a difficult time believing this. They were sure that the author was someone like them and that no one else could possibly be interested in his work. Angel then turned to me and asked, “Who reads this @#\$%?” I said that many people read it because they enjoyed learning about how other people experience the world and about circumstances that differ from their own.

This was hard for the students to comprehend. Although they were clearly moved by the story, they failed to see why anyone else would be interested in what to them was commonplace. Their firm disbelief made clear to me the sad truth of how many of our students’ lives are completely marginalized in most of the literature that schools provide. Seldom, if ever,



seeing themselves reflected in the stories, plays, and novels they're forced to read in school, they begin to believe that their own lives are unimportant, that they're invisible.

I could see I was losing them. Unwilling to let this opportunity slip away, I began insisting that not only did people want to read Junot Díaz's stories about poverty and life in the *barrio*, they would be equally eager to read the students' stories as well. "I guarantee that if you write about your own lives, people will want to read it." As I saw some of them start to turn away, I added in desperation, "In fact, if you write your stories in class, I'll make sure you get published and have your own book." That got their attention.

Angel, ever the cynic, asked me, "You mean those stupid Kinko books, with the spiral binding?"

"Of course not," I responded. "These will be real books, like you see in a bookstore, with your picture on the back, and an author bio just like Junot Díaz!" As the bell rang and they gathered their things, I continued, "So what do you say? If I promise to get you published, will you write your stories?" As he walked out the door, Angel nodded, and the others seemed to agree. Jubilant, I couldn't stop smiling, until it hit me that in my eagerness to get them interested, I had just made a promise that I had no way of knowing how to fulfill.

### The Work Begins

Dozens of frantic phone calls to publishers later, I finally made contact with one who was willing to publish the books as long as the students could each presell at least 10 copies. He explained that this would cover his printing costs and that any copies the students sold beyond that would earn them a small royalty as well. Ecstatic, I rushed into class the next morning with the news that we had a publisher.

From that day on, my formerly recalcitrant, subdued, and passive students transformed before my eyes into passionate, engaged, and prolific readers and writers. Each day I read to them from authors like Sandra Cisneros, Sapphire, and Junot Díaz; showed them clips from films like *City of God*; and had discussions about the issues that mattered most in their lives and affected them most deeply. We talked about what it means to be poor, about the cycle of poverty that keeps people chained to



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their circumstances. We talked about stereotypes, race, and gender, and about power—who has it, who doesn't, and why. The plan was that once we had read about and discussed these things, the students would write their own narratives.

I used Sandra Cisneros's novel, *The House on Mango Street* (Vintage, 1991), as a framework. I had the students write short vignettes about their name, their neighborhood, their family, their friends, and finally their dreams. Each week, they would write a new vignette, and then they would edit one another's work in small groups. The vignettes that students produced were vivid, poignant, and heart wrenching. They wrote about the challenges they faced with poverty, about losing friends and family to violence, about the pressures of being surrounded by a gang culture that punishes those who refuse to participate, and about their inability to pay application fees for college. They wrote about wanting to make

things better for themselves and their parents; about wanting to feel safe; and, finally, about wanting to find love, happiness, and success.

It was amazing to see what using relevant curriculum and personal narrative could accomplish with my students when all else had failed. Students who had barely attended school were now present every day. Those who continued to miss school regularly because of suspensions, fights, or illness would make a point of e-mailing me their work. Whatever else they missed, the one thing that never suffered was their book project.

I conducted the project with all three of my English classes—two sections of freshmen and one section of juniors. The most telling incident occurred with one of my freshmen, Tina. Tina had walked into my classroom on the first day of school with several inches of makeup caked on her face, and wearing a low-cut top and too tight jeans. Without even giving me a second glance, she strutted into the room, stood facing the class, and yelled “Holla!” Once I managed to get her to sit down, she continued to talk loudly to students across the room, interrupting the lesson.

Once the book project started, however, Tina was transformed. Allowed to have a voice, allowed to tell her story, she began writing with a vengeance. Tina would be absent at least once every week because she would get suspended for bad behavior in her other classes. One day, I received a phone call during my prep period. It was Tina. When I asked her where she was, she responded, “Miss, that b—— suspended me again, but can you come out to the quad? I have my stuff for you.” Incredulous that she had come to school despite being suspended to give me her “stuff,” I walked out to the quad. There indeed was Tina, hiding behind a clump of bushes, her handwritten stories clutched firmly in hand. She delivered them to me carefully and ran back to her friend’s waiting car, trusting that I would get them into the book.

The trust these students placed in me was incredibly touching. Knowing little about me, having only met me a few weeks before, they clung desperately to the hope that I would indeed be the one to finally let them be heard. The mere fact that I was allowing them a space to speak and write about what mattered to them was enough for them to open up

and entrust me with their deepest thoughts. Their trust left me humbled, honored, and inspired to help them succeed.

After two months of hard work, during which students stayed in of their own volition during lunch or after school and even got permission to skip other classes so they could work on their narratives, the combined manuscript was finally ready. The next

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step was for each student to presell 10 copies of the book. I saw this as an opportunity for them to build further literacy skills, including communicating with others effectively, persuading their customers that their book was worth buying, identifying audience and purpose, and making a convincing argument, all in the real-life, hands-on context of getting their 10 books sold. To my surprise, they were all able to presell their copies within a week of having completed the book. Many of the teachers ordered copies, and family and community members were equally responsive.

We sent the money off to the printer, and a month later, the books arrived, shiny and new, fresh off the presses. The title, *Dreams Are for Others* (Booklocker, 2007), was inspired by a conversation I had early on in the process with José, one of the students. We were discussing a chapter in the book titled “Dreams” and how it would contain all of their hopes and dreams. José began to laugh. When I asked him what was so funny, he replied, “Dreams are for other people, Miss. Not those in East Palo Alto. Here, you never know if you will be here tomorrow, or if you will ever wake up again.”



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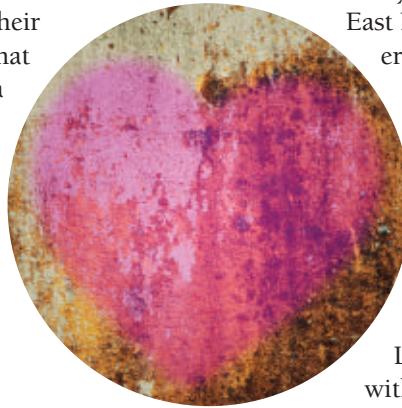
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### Building Hope

José's comment compelled me to reflect deeply on the reality for so many students in U.S. classrooms. So many are bereft of dreams because they're bereft of hope. Motivating such students becomes impossible unless we understand their underlying hopelessness and do what we can to connect our content area with a concrete path to success. One of the most powerful ways we can motivate students is by allowing them to speak, read, and write about what matters to them. This doesn't necessarily preclude them from reading and writing about other things. However, unless we draw such students in by first validating their own experiences and interests, we cannot bridge those experiences and interests with the larger world of experience and knowledge that we seek to introduce.

The book enabled Angel to voice his frustration with a system that allowed some kids to have everything, while he often had to steal to make ends meet. It also enabled him to articulate his hope of attending an art academy one day. The Dreams chapter enabled José to voice for the first time his tentative dream of owning a mechanic shop and escaping gang violence so he could keep his family safe. It enabled Tina to reveal that under that overly made-up and brash façade was a scared young woman who found solace in drugs and alcohol. She was able to take on the role of mentor for the first time, advising readers to love their children so their children wouldn't succumb to drugs.

As published authors, many of the students found the confidence to stay in school, and a few of my juniors ended up going on to community college.



I was particularly happy to hear from Liz, one of my pregnant students who seemed utterly without hope, who wrote to me two years later to tell me she was attending Chabot College.

After my initial success with the students in East Palo Alto, I decided to start the Literate Voices project, which works with school districts across the United States to motivate and empower students and get them published. Because our initial publisher shut down, I began working briefly with print-on-demand publishers and eventually started publishing student anthologies myself under the Literate Voices imprint. I have worked with several school districts in the Central Valley of California, publishing four subsequent volumes of student writing.<sup>1</sup> My hope is to encourage more and more students to speak out and find their voices.

I firmly believe that personal narrative is not merely an exercise in narcissistic self-indulgence. Rather, it becomes a way to build literacy while empowering students and motivating them to engage, often for the first time, with school and all it has to offer. ■

<sup>1</sup>*Against the Odds: Visalia Voices* (Booklocker, 2010); *Beyond the Fields: Sanger Stories* (Booklocker, 2010); *Among the Groves: Lindsay Lives* (Literate Voices, 2011); and *Niños de Oro: Cutler-Orosi Chronicles* (Literate Voices, 2012)

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