

How Creative Writing Can Increase Students' Resilience



Students can find strength and community in sharing their stories through writing.

BY LAURA BEAN | OCTOBER 30, 2018

Many of my seventh-grade students do not arrive at school ready to learn. Their families often face financial hardship and live in cramped quarters, which makes it difficult to focus on homework. The responsibility for cooking and taking care of younger siblings while parents work often falls on these twelve year olds' small shoulders. Domestic violence and abuse are also not uncommon.



To help traumatized students overcome their personal and academic challenges, one of our first jobs as teachers is to build a sense of community. We need to communicate that we care and that we welcome them into the classroom just as they are. One of the best ways I've found to connect with my students, while also nurturing their reading and writing skills, is through creative writing.

For the past three years, I've invited students in my English Language Development (ELD) classes to observe their thoughts, sit with their emotions, and offer themselves and each other compassion through writing and sharing about their struggles. Creating a safe, respectful environment in which students' stories matter invites the disengaged, the hopeless, and the numb to open up. Students realize that nobody is perfect and nobody's life is perfect. In this kind of classroom community, they can take the necessary risks in order to learn, and they become more resilient when they stumble.

Fostering a growth mindset

One of the ways students can boost their academic performance and develop resilience is by building a growth mindset. Carol Dweck, Stanford University professor of psychology and author of the book *Mindset*, explains that people with a growth mindset focus on learning from mistakes and welcoming challenges rather than thinking they're doomed to be dumb or unskillful. A growth mindset goes hand in hand with self-compassion: recognizing that everyone struggles and treating ourselves with kindness when we trip up.

One exercise I find very useful is to have students write a story about a time when they persevered when faced with a challenge—in class, sports, or a relationship. Some of the themes students explore include finally solving math problems, learning how to defend themselves, or having difficult conversations with parents.

I primed the pump by telling my students about something I struggled with—feeling left behind in staff meetings as my colleagues clicked their way through various computer applications. I confided that PowerPoint and Google Slides—tools (one might assume) that any teacher worth a paperweight has mastered—still eluded me. By admitting my deficiency to my students, asking for their help, and choosing to see the opportunity to remedy it every day in the classroom, I aimed to level the playing field with them. They may have been reading three or four grade levels behind, but they could slap a PowerPoint presentation together in their sleep.

For students, sharing their own stories of bravery, resilience, and determination brings these qualities to the forefront of their minds and helps solidify the belief that underlies a growth mindset: I can improve and grow. We know from research in neuroplasticity that when students take baby steps to achieve a goal and take pride in their accomplishments, they change their brains, growing new neural networks and fortifying existing ones. Neurons in the brain release the feel-good chemical dopamine, which plays a major role in motivating behavior toward rewards.

After writing about a few different personal topics, students choose one they want to publish on the bulletin boards at the back of the classroom. They learn to include the juicy details of their stories (who, what, when, where, why, and how), and they get help

from their peers, who ask follow-up questions to prompt them to include more information. This peer editing builds their resilience in more ways than one—they make connections with each other by learning about each other’s lives, and they feel empowered by lending a hand.

In my experience, students are motivated to do this assignment because it helps them feel that their personal stories and emotions truly matter, despite how their other academics are going. One student named Alejandro chose to reflect on basketball and the persistence and time it took him to learn:

Hoops

By Alejandro Gonzalez

Being good takes time. One time my sister took me to a park and I saw people playing basketball. I noticed how good they were and decided I wanted to be like them. Still I told my sister that basketball looked hard and that I thought I couldn’t do it. She said, “You could do it if you tried. You’ll get the hang of it.”

My dad bought me a backboard and hoop to play with. I was really happy, but the ball wasn’t making it in. Every time I got home from school, I would go straight to the backyard to play. I did that almost every day until little by little I was getting the hang of it. I also played with my friends. Every day after lunch we would meet at the basketball court to have a game. ...

I learned that you need to be patient and to practice a lot to get the hang of things. With a little bit of practice, patience, and hard work, anything is possible.

Originally, Alejandro wasn't sure why he was in school and often lacked the motivation to learn. But writing about something he was passionate about and recalling the steps that led to his success reminded him of the determination and perseverance he had demonstrated in the past, nurturing a positive view of himself. It gave him a renewed sense of investment in learning English and eventually helped him succeed in his ELD class, as well.

Maintaining a hopeful outlook

Another way to build resilience in the face of external challenges is to shore up our inner reserves of hope—and I've found that poetry can serve as inspiration for this.

For the writing portion of the lesson, I invite students to “get inside” poems by replicating the underlying structure and trying their hand at writing their own verses. I create poem templates, where students fill in relevant blanks with their own ideas.

One poem I like to share is “So Much Happiness” by Naomi Shihab Nye. Its lines “Even the fact that you once lived in a peaceful tree house / and now live over a quarry of noise and dust / cannot make you unhappy” remind us that, despite the unpleasant events that occur in our lives, it's our choice whether to allow them to interfere with our happiness. The speaker, who “love[s] even the floor which needs to be swept, the soiled linens, and scratched records,” has a persistently sunny outlook.

It's unrealistic for students who hear gunshots at night to be bubbling over with happiness the next morning. Still, the routine of the school day and the sense of community—jokes with friends, a shared bag of hot chips for breakfast, and a creative outlet—do bolster these kids. They have an unmistakable drive to keep going, a life force that may even burn brighter because they take nothing for granted—not even the breath in their bodies, life itself.

Itzayana was one of those students who, due to the adversity in her life, seemed too old for her years. She rarely smiled and started the school year with a defiant approach to me and school in general, cursing frequently in the classroom. Itzayana's version of “So Much Happiness” hinted at some of the challenges I had suspected she had in her home life:

It is difficult to know what to do with so much happiness.
Even the fact that you once heard your family laughing
and now hear them yelling at each other
cannot make you unhappy.

Everything has a life of its own,
it too could wake up filled with possibilities
of tamales and horchata
and love even scrubbing the floor, washing dishes, and cleaning
your room.

Since there is no place large enough
to contain so much happiness, help people in need, help your
family,
and take care of yourself.

—Itzayana C.

Her ending lines, “Since there is no place large enough to contain so much happiness, / help people in need, help your family, and take care of yourself,” showed her growing awareness of the need for self-care as she continued to support her family and others around her. This is a clear sign of her developing resilience.

Poetry is packed with emotion, and writing their own poems allows students to grapple with their own often-turbulent inner lives. One student commented on the process, saying, “By writing poems, I’ve learned to be calm and patient, especially when I get mad about something dumb.” Another student showed pride in having her writing published; she reflected, “I feel good because other kids can use it for calming down when they’re angry.”

To ease students into the creative process, sometimes we also write poems together as a class. We brainstorm lines to include, inviting the silly as well as the poignant and creating something that represents our community.

Practicing kindness

Besides offering my students new ways of thinking about themselves, I also invite them to take kind actions toward themselves and others.

In the music video for “Give a Little Love” by Noah and the Whale, one young African American boy—who witnesses bullying at school and neglect in his neighborhood — decides to take positive action and whitewash a wall of graffiti. Throughout the video, people witness others’ random acts of kindness, and then go on to do their own bit.

“My love is my whole being / And I’ve shared what I could,” the lyrics say—a reminder that our actions speak louder than our words and do have an incredible impact. The final refrain in the song—“Well if you are (what you love) / And you do (what you love) /...What you share with the world is what it keeps of you”—urges the students to contribute in a positive way to the classroom, the school campus, and their larger community.

After watching the video, I ask students to reflect upon what kind of community they would like to be part of and what makes them feel safe at school. They write their answers—for example, not being laughed at by their peers and being listened to—on Post-it notes. These notes are used to create classroom rules. This activity sends a message early on that we are co-creating our communal experience together. Students also write their own versions of the lyrics, reflecting on different things you can give and receive—like kindness, peace, love, and ice cream.

Reaping the benefits

To see how creative writing impacts students, I invite them to rate their resilience through a self-compassion survey at the start of the school year and again in the spring. Last year, two-thirds of students surveyed increased in self-compassion; Alejandro grew

his self-compassion by 20 percent. The program seems to work at developing their reading and writing skills, as well: At the middle of the school year, 40 percent of my students moved up to the next level of ELD, compared to 20 percent the previous year.

As a teacher, my goal is to meet students where they're at and learn about their whole lives. Through creative writing activities, we create a community of compassionate and expressive learners who bear witness to the impact of trauma in each others' experiences and together build resilience.

As a symbol of community and strength, I had a poster in my classroom of a boat at sea with hundreds of refugees standing shoulder to shoulder looking skyward. It's a hauntingly beautiful image of our ability to risk it all for a better life, as many of my ELD students do. Recognizing our common humanity and being able to share about our struggles not only leads to some beautiful writing, but also some brave hearts.

About the Author



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Laura Bean, M.F.A., executive director of Mindful Literacy, consults with school communities to implement mindfulness and creative writing programs. She has an M.F.A. in Creative Writing and presented a mindful writing workshop at Bridging the Hearts and Minds of Youth Conference in San Diego in 2016.
