

How a Childhood “Haunting” Can Make your Students Better Writers

Kitty Donohoe

When I was eight my older sister convinced me that I was haunted by my great grandmother. The disembodied voice floating up through the vent in our bedroom was NOT my sister as I had originally suspected, but rather our great grandmother, bent on making sure I behaved. The proverbial Armageddon in our house when I discovered my sister was indeed the ghost and not my great grandmother is legendary in the Donohoe family. What I wish to put forward here is that stories, like my being haunted, can be used as a tool inviting young learners into writing. That particular “haunting” story had a lot of social capital with my third graders. Teachers often have more social capital in their own stories than they realize.



And, the more you can throw in a flashy component like a fake haunting, or a sibling issue which most kids understand, the better. The more outrageous, the more enthralled the audience. The more enthralled the audience, the better the student transfer to their own writing. After all, written language was story telling long before the arrival of pen and paper.

The day I shared my “Haunting of Kitty Donohoe Story” orally in my class, I did not have to remind one eight-year-old to pay attention. In fact there was a gasp of sadness when the story ended. Followed by a stampede to begin their own personal narratives. It appeared that the topic and authenticity hit home.

Kids love stories about their teachers, especially when their teacher was the same age that they are. Never mind that several of the personal narratives written that day were “coincidentally” stories of

being haunted by siblings – this meant there was transfer and approximation of telling a story with suspense.

SO HERE YOU HAVE MY FIRST INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGY FOR AGENCY AND CREATIVITY:

Story tell authentic moments from your youth when you were the age of your students. Look them in the eye, gather them in physically and emotionally. Harken to the era when a well told tale around the fire was the currency of the times. Good story telling never goes out of style and provides an exemplar for youngsters learning the craft. Create a bank of your own stories that you can share with students. No one can tell your story as well as you can.

Choice is also of the utmost importance for student agency and creativity. Inspired by Ralph Fletcher’s *Joy Write* chapter on Greenbelt writing, I introduced my students to *Wild Writing*.

“What was Wild Writing?” little voices whispered. I assured them it was enchanting. Were fairies involved they wanted to know. Absolutely, if they wanted them to be. Other possible topics were thrown out by curious children and an excited thrum filled the classroom. Yes, Wild Writing is all topics I proclaimed to the eager masses.

Then with much aplomb and drama, each child received a neon orange “Wild Writing” folder.

“Wild Writing is writing about any topic in any form that you enjoy,” I announced. “Fiction, non fiction, poetry, graphic novel, ANYTHING!” I continued. . . .” On your mark, get set, WRITE.”

I believe I screamed the last part for emphasis.

BOOM! Never had I seen so many little heads and hands bobbing over the pages- creating all writing in every possible form. Choice equals agency equals creativity.

AND HERE YOU HAVE MY SECOND STRATEGY:

Let kids have the freedom to be kids and give them the time to write whatever they want to write. (And I hope this goes without saying that the same applies to reading.)

When young people understand that you were once their age and had adventures much as they have today and you give them the time and room to tell those stories in their own way, it is amazing what magic will happen in a classroom. After all, if a teacher can survive a haunting, anything is possible.

About the Author:

Kitty Donohoe has taught primary grades for over three decades in Santa Monica. Her first children’s book, *How to Ride a Dragonfly*, published by Anne Schwartz Books, comes out in May 2022.