

Chapter 4: Other Ways to Personalize

It is possible to live twenty-four hours a day in a state of love. Every movement, every glance, every thought, and every word can be infused with love.

~ Thich Nhat Hanh

Personalized writing

Students don't have to write about themselves for it to be personalized. Writing can be done as a group project and can become an input activity. Just as we try to include details about our students in live stories, we can write their information into stories. Writing becomes an input activity when we do it together because, even though they are all writing the story as we create it, they are also reading what I am writing, and I am continually repeating the sentences and asking questions about them.

For example: (exclusively in the target language):

Teacher spoken: What shall we call the main character in our story?

Class: Mark.

Teacher spoken: Okay, what is Mark like? Describe him.

Class: Tall. Blonde hair. Brown eyes. Skinny. He is wearing a green hat.

Teacher written: Mark is tall. He has blonde hair. (students copy)

Teacher spoken: Mark is tall or short? He has what color hair? Is his hair long or short?

Class responds with clarifications.

Teacher written: His hair is very long. He is wearing a green hat. (students copy)

Teacher spoken: What color is Mark's hat? Is his hair long or short?

Class responds.

Teacher written: Mark is not fat. Mark is very skinny. Mark is tall and skinny. (students copy)

Teacher spoken: Is Mark fat? Is Mark short? What else is Mark wearing?

Class: A yellow raincoat. A scarf. Boots. A swimming suit.

Teacher spoken: Mark is wearing a yellow raincoat? He is wearing a yellow raincoat AND a scarf? What color is the scarf? Orange? Purple? He is wearing boots? Is he wearing cowboy boots or snow boots? He's wearing a swimming suit under his raincoat? No? OVER his raincoat?

Teacher written: Mark is wearing a green hat, a yellow raincoat and an orange scarf. He is also wearing cowboy boots. He is wearing a swim suit over his yellow raincoat. (students copy)

In this way, as the teacher is writing and speaking, the writing activity becomes an input activity with a small amount of output. Using the answers the students contribute personalize the story and make it uniquely ours.

We often share that story with other classes, so that each class has a story unique to the personalities in the class.

Personalized geography

Pick a place that you would like to put on your bucket list. Where is it? How do you get there? How long will it take to get there? Where will you stay when you get there? How much will it cost? How long will you stay? Find a picture of the place, print it, label it with all of this information and bring it into class and tack it on the wall on a traced map, so that we know where in the world it is. (i.e. if the assignment is to find a place in South America, place all of the pictures in the correct place on that map.) This becomes our live "Dream Board" of all of the great places we want to visit. (This is not an essay.) It should be more or less labeled like this:

El volcan Arenal

La Fortuna, Costa Rica

\$700 ticket, \$6 bus ride, \$30 hostel per night, \$70 hot springs. Food. Total = 10 días

The alternative to this is to have students show pictures on-line of the places that they would like to visit, but this becomes a time sucking vortex of technical difficulties, presentation preparation, oral presentation etc. etc. when it was only meant to be a bucket list that would help students do more than just study meaningless geography. It also makes it easy to look up at the wall and be able to work a neat detail about a person into a story.

As we later talk about people in class, we will recall where they wanted to visit as one of the interesting details about them.

Celebrities

Celebrity worship is rampant in the U.S. and it serves no good purpose. In fact it can even be harmful. As young girls idolize skinny celebrities, they can adopt a plethora of unhealthy behaviors in order to be more like them.

Hero worship has mixed results. I'd certainly rather see a student excited about an athlete or a musician than some of the celebrities that grace the covers of magazines who are famous simply for being the children of the wealthy. However, those who are uninterested in sports and unathletic may feel left out when there are few math and science celebrities.

Here is the solution: Students pick their own favorite role models in as many categories as you like. Favorite philanthropist, favorite politician, favorite historical figure, favorite athlete, favorite superhero.... Those characters can then be worked into stories about them, but they will not be worshiped and idolized. The celebrity will turn to our students for advice.... Will call our students for help.... Will recognize our students in public and shower them with attention.... Will invite them to parties and then call to find out why they didn't come.... Will ask them for a role in an upcoming movie.... Our students become the powerful heroes and superheroes of their own stories. When phones accidentally ring in class, we say it is the celebrity calling to ask them for a favor.

Tragedies happen and before Superman even has time to respond, our students have already solved the problem and saved the day.

Experts

Our students are experts. Everyone is an expert on something. We can even have an expert on experts or an expert on everything. Whenever we are unsure of something, we consult our "experts." We recently had an expert on dying. He was immortal, but had died several times, like the main character in the Bill Murray movie "Groundhog Day."

In one class we had an expert on elephants who was able to answer the question about whether or not elephants can, in fact, jump.

Popsicle sticks

Each student writes his or her name on a popsicle stick. I use these to randomly call on students or occasionally to randomly choose actors. The role of "Isabela" will be played by..... Nicolás. Popsicle sticks can also be used to create random partners or groups.

Like your students

It got back to me that a student had approached my daughter in the hall to tell her how she didn't like me. The next day I told my classes that it was unfair to subject her to that kind of feedback and asked them to have some compassion for her. "I'm not trying to get you to like me," I told them. "I'm spending all of MY energy on liking you."

We all have bad days. The likelihood that on any given day one of my students or I is having one is likely close to 100%. But I'm always trying to see the best in them.

Slide shows

Once I know who the celebrities are that my students like, I gather images of them from the internet into a slide show. When a celebrity comes up, I can flash an image on the overhead screen. The whole slide show can be used just to generate discussion. Questions like..."Do you like....", or "who is the better actor", or "who has more money?" can be asked about any celebrity.

The Prop Mistress (or Prop Master)

One student in every class is responsible for props. He or she raids the prop suitcase or closet and dresses the characters. As one person becomes familiar with props, he or she will know what is there and how to make the story more interesting by adding props. Whether or not I manage to work that person into a story and talk specifically about him or her during this class, she will be engaged in the story because she has a part in it and is integral to its success.

I buy props from Halloween stores the day after Halloween and from dollar stores. My students often have favorite props and want them in stories.

The sound effects

A small \$10.00 sound effect machine occupies the attention of an additional student. It is that person's responsibility to find appropriate times to add sound effects to the story. Those who choose not to be actively engaged in any other way will find their niche making silly sounds.

LIST OF PROPS I NEED TO HAVE:

Nerf balls (muscles)

Wigs

Boas

Crown

Flowers

Chocolate

Rubber chicken

Silly string

Sound machine maker

***"Children are likely to live up to what you believe of
Lady Bird Johnson, former U.S.***

"No one has yet fully realized the wealth of sympathy, kindness and generosity hidden in the soul of a child. The effort of every true education should be to unlock that treasure."

- Emma Goldman, author

TELLING TALL TALES

It's all stories. Stories are powerful. Stories are memorable. This one time...

Tell your best stories.... Tell them in short pieces. Don't tell mine, though. Tell yours. Stories create long-term memories. They are more memorable if they evoke emotions. Most importantly, take regular, every day stories and exaggerate them and act them out and add bizarre details to an otherwise realistic story to make it more interesting. It's just like telling a tall tale. The fish was THIS big!!

Here's an example of one of my stories:

I was driving to teach a class in Aspen, Colorado. I was driving while putting on make-up. I was driving and putting on make-up and drinking coffee.

I was not driving fast. I was driving slowly. But I drove through a school zone. I did not slow down.

A police officer saw me. He turned on his lights and followed me. I pulled over. I gave him my license and my registration and my insurance. He said I was going too fast in a school zone. He asked me where I was going. I told him that I was going to Aspen High School to teach a Spanish class to adults in Aspen.

He did not give me a ticket. He told me to slow down, but he did not give me a ticket. I drove to the class. When the class started I looked at the students. One of the students in my class was the police officer.

During this class the police officer and I both knew that he had pulled me over before class, but the participants did not have enough Spanish on the first day to understand the story in Spanish, so I waited until they could understand it in the target language to tell it. First I prepped the story.

Story-asking

On the second day, instead of telling the story, I asked questions like:

Who drives fast? Who in the class has the most speeding tickets? (We can generally narrow this down to one person with a show of hands and that usually results in a couple of stories about someone with a serious speeding problem.)

Who drinks coffee while driving? Who eats in the car? Who puts on make-up while she drives? Who talks on the phone while driving? Who texts while driving? Do you listen to the radio while driving? Do you sing while driving?

A funny story is created by rolling all of this information into one character. We sometimes act out the story and as one “actor” is acting out while I narrate the story about someone speeding while listening to the radio and singing along and talking on the phone and putting on make-up and drinking coffee and eating (not something easy to eat like a candy bar, but something difficult to eat in the car like spaghetti). As the person is pulled over by the police, he can be given a ticket, can be given a warning, can be asked for his license and registration, can decide to bribe the police officer, can try to outrun the police, can decide to give the police officer spaghetti.... That ultimate decision can be made by the class and options can be discussed about what the police officer should decide to do.

One time as we told a story like this one the police officer asked for the woman’s phone number. She gave him a number and he used his cell phone to dial her number while we were still acting out the story. The class was laughing. A phone began ringing in the classroom, but it was not hers. She had given him the number of her friend, who was also in the class.

This story can include cultural elements like how a police officer in another country gestures to a car to slow down, what they ask for, whether or not it is expected or illegal to bribe the police officer (Nicaragua, Honduras, Costa Rica), how many kilometers (versus) miles per hour a car was traveling, whether or not the stop was just for an identity / passport / illegal immigrant check or for a violation, what to do when you receive a ticket in another country – pay the officer or pay the fine at a government building or mail it in.

When we have included details from many students in our story and made it funny by adding silly details that wouldn’t have all happened at the same time, each person whose detail ended up in the story ends up feeling acknowledged and is engaged.

Telling my own story

I will then tell my story. The police officer and I have had an inside joke during this whole class. As I tell what happened I can ask him to confirm details and ask him questions from his perspective. How fast was I going?

As I collaborated with him to tell the story, I learned that he and the class had had their own inside joke going the entire time. He had also pulled over three other students in the class that first morning!

I have also talked two truck drivers who had already loaded my car onto their truck out of towing my rental car. I have outrun a police car in Costa Rica. I saw Usher in an airport and chased him to get a picture to show my students.

What does this have to do with culture?

El “qué dirán.”

Protecting the reputation of young women.

Telling tall tales.

Is gossip shared behind people’s backs or directly with the person?

If a person does not greet another upon entering a room, what does that mean?

Share your stories to model how our students should look at their own lives as stories that can later be told in class, but also model that there is joy in every day situations.

"Only where children gather is there any real chance of fun."

— Mignon McLaughlin

TYPICAL TECHNIQUES / ON WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO BE COACHED?

1. **STORY ASKING TECHNIQUES**
 - a. **ASKING QUESTIONS:**
 - CIRCLING (ASKING QUESTIONS WITHOUT QUESTION WORDS)**
 - PARKING (ASKING QUESTIONS WITH QUESTION WORDS)**
 - PERSONALIZED QUESTIONS**
 - ...THAT WE DO KNOW THE ANSWER TO**
 -THAT THEY HAVE TO GUESS**
 - b. **HIGH NUMBER OF REPETITIONS**
 - c. **GETTING DETAILS**
 - d. **LISTENING TO AND ACKNOWLEDGING RESPONSES.**
 - e. **REJECTING / ACCEPTING / TAUNTING RESPONSES**
 - f. **CONFIRMING DETAILS WITH THE ACTOR AND CLASS**
 - g. **COMPARING AND CONTRASTING RESPONSES**

2. **PERSONALIZATION**
 - a. **PARALLEL STORY / COMPARING AND CONTRASTING**
 - b. **STUDENT RAPPORT**
 - c. **REMEMBERING DETAILS**
 - d. **INCORPORATING PREVIOUS INFORMATION**
 - e. **HONORING STUDENT CONTRIBUTIONS**

3. **CREATING A STORY ON YOUR FEET**

4. **COACHING ACTING**
 - a. **USING PROPS**
 - b. **STAGING**
 - c. **TIMING**
 - d. **WHISPER TECHNIQUE**
 - e. **BEING THE VOICE OF THE ACTOR / ANOTHER STUDENT**
BEING THE VOICE OF THE ACTOR
 - f. **COMPLIMENT AND PRAISE ACTORS**