Definition: Narrative Redemptive Therapy

The WriteBoston *Narrative Redemptive Writing Curriculum* helps people transform their stories. Instead of being individuals who have been traumatized, writers envision themselves as powerful people who can and do heal. Writing a story from one’s life allows that person to reframe the entire narrative arc of his or her life; research has shown doing so further empowers people to continue to heal. Research has also shown trauma interferes with learning; helping students reframe trauma positions them so they can advance into academic types of writing such as persuasion and argument.

Through the process of sharing their work, students also slowly create community with one another because they share their experiences, hear the experiences of their peers, and dialog in a safe and structured environment.

*Narrative Therapy in Practice*, edited by Gerald Monk, John Winslade, Kathie Crocket, and David Epston provides valuable resources and information. Dr. James Pennebaker has also contributed a great deal to this field of work. His web page is: http://homepage.psy.utexas.edu/HomePage/Faculty/Pennebaker/home2000/JWPhome.htm

Write Boston has developed two models for delivering this work:

**The Writing Coach Model:** A Writing Coach attends school twice a week, and works in the classroom with the teacher and the students over the course of the entire academic year. She introduces curriculum and writing exercises, establishes community guidelines so that students can present their work to one another, and guides students towards seeing their redemption in their stories.

**The Train the Teacher/Youth Mentor Model:** Teachers and other youth mentors participate in five training sessions, each three hours in length. The learning here is experiential; i.e., the participants write their own narrative redemptive essay, create their own writing community, and translate their experiences into practical strategies for their own classrooms or programs.
The Writing Coach Model

**One Alternative School’s Students:** Of the thirty students currently at the school, fourteen female, sixteen male, and twenty-three graduating this year, only seven come from unbroken families. Occasionally, students are homeless. Poverty is the norm and violence is commonplace. Some students have lost siblings to gang violence, or themselves been victims of gang violence. Students have been victims of rape and incest. Several have been witnesses to murder. A number of the students struggle with, or have come through, alcohol and drug addiction.

The Writing Coach

**Quotes**

**Creating Engagement and Community:** Though the students know one another, many had withheld a lot of their experience, a natural consequence of trauma. Suddenly, they realized that having an essay workshopped allowed them to be the center of attention, and to TELL THEIR STORY. They began to beg to read their essays aloud in class—one per class.

The Writing Coach

**Improving Writing Skills:** The students started out writing a paragraph—now they are writing one page, two pages, even up to six or seven pages.

The Teacher

**Redeeming Trauma Into Stories of Heroism:** Everyone came asking me what happened. I didn’t want to tell the story because I was ashamed. Ashamed of me….Where else can you turn for safety if you feel insecure inside your own neighborhood?….I created safety inside myself. *(emphasis added).*

A Student Writer
Quotes from Training Teachers and Other Youth Mentors

**Helping Students Create Engagement and Community:** The most important element I gained in the course was learning how to create an environment where students feel like a community of artists.

A teacher

**Helping Students Redeem Their Trauma Into Stories of Heroism:** I opened an e-mail from one of my young female students and read her shocking and devastating account of abuse and neglect, fear, anger, and betrayal. I decided to try to use some of the Narrative Redemptive stuff in my response. This student said that she really wanted to tell me her story, but was ashamed and didn’t think she could verbalize it, so we wrote back and forth. I felt like we were doing an informal and adapted version of the NRW process; everything we were learning (in NRW workshops) played a part in my responses. She’d send me her story in chunks, paragraph by paragraph, and I’d respond after each installment, softly employing narrative redemptive methods and pointing her ever-so-gently closer to finding her own redemptive perspective. Within the course of three weeks and many e-mails, she went from feeling despondent, ashamed, guilty, and victimized to informing me that she was a brave, strong survivor. I really think that this amazingly rapid self-growth, self-realization, and self-redefinition came channeled through NRW techniques, loosely applied though they were. I was really impressed with the potential I saw for NRW to change writers’ perceptions of themselves and to HEAL them SELVES. It will absolutely change my teaching, in that it adds greatly to my effectiveness in helping students find new, healing self-perspectives, while also showing them that writing doesn’t have to be scary, and it can even be fun.

A Youth Mentor

Barbara Ohrstrom
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Narrative Essay of Your Redemption

Length: typed pages, double-spaced.
Rough Draft 1 Due:
Rough Draft 2 Due:
Rough Draft 3 Due:
Final ESSAY DUE:

YOUR ROLE AS THE WRITER: Teacher, wise elder.
AUDIENCE: People you want to teach, friends, adults in authority.

WHAT: Write the story about ONE event in your life that challenged you. How did you face the challenge, how has facing the challenge made you into a person whom you admire and respect? If you like, try thinking about it this way:

I had this experience
It knocked me down because...
Then _______ helped me see myself as a ________ person.

WHY: In terms of writing skills, this essay will help develop focus, development, organization, paragraph structure, and grammar. Writing about your own life is a form of self-analysis: it helps you learn more about where you have been and who you are. Most significantly, this narrative will help you experience how strong and powerful you are!
MORE BRAINSTORMING to ACCESS REDEMPTION

1. What restrictions has your challenge placed upon your life?

2. What is the impact of this challenge on your life?

3. What are or were some of the first signs you would or will overcome your challenge?

4. How do or did you prepare yourself to face your challenge?

5. What actions by you make a difference regarding your challenge?

6. How would you describe the influence you have over your challenge?

7. How would you describe the influence that your challenge has over you?

8. What have you discovered about yourself as you have faced this challenge?

9. What have others noticed about you? How were others affected by your struggle? Were there important people who did not notice your struggle?

10. How did others help you with your struggle?

11. Who would predict you would or will succeed in facing this challenge?
MORE BRAINSTORMING TO CREATE THE STORY

3. Let’s fill in some details before writing your story:

SETTING

EMOTIONS

SITUATION

YOU as the MAIN CHARACTER/Your Conflicts and Connections:

THEME (the overall message or lesson you are getting across.)
BRAINSTORMING to determine ORGANIZATION:

Every narrative has a beginning, middle and end. Every narrative also has three key parts: opening, rising action, and climax/resolution. You, as the writer, can organize these three key parts to create different kinds of stories with different purposes and feelings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>KIND OF STORY</th>
<th>STORY BEGINNING</th>
<th>BASIC STORY QUESTIONS ASKED BY READER</th>
<th>WHAT PARTS OF THE STORY ARE KNOWN/UNKNOWN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Opening</td>
<td>What next?</td>
<td>before After?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>How will this situation develop?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>How will this situation end?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACTION/ SUSPENSE</td>
<td>Rising Action</td>
<td>How did we get here?</td>
<td>before? after?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Where are we going to?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MYSTERY/ EXPLANATION</td>
<td>Climax/resolution</td>
<td>Why did things end up this way?</td>
<td>before? after</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>What happened before to cause the ending?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Let’s look at what you need to do to structure your story. Sometimes, it is helpful to map out your entire story or plot on a circle and then experiment with starting in different places.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>KIND of STORY</th>
<th>1st Key Part</th>
<th>2nd Key Part</th>
<th>3rd Key Part</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TRADITIONAL</td>
<td>Opening</td>
<td>Rising Action</td>
<td>Climax/Resolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACTION SUSPENSE</td>
<td>Rising Action</td>
<td>Beginning to Rising Action</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
COMMUNITY GUIDELINES WHEN WRITERS READ THEIR ESSAYS TO THE CLASS

Before the class begins, ask an individual writer (Writer) if he or she is willing to read their essay for in-class feedback. Assure the Writer that he or she is the boss—absolutely nothing will be discussed without the express permission of the Writer.

Make copies of the Writer’s essay for each writer in the class. Before reading begins, explain the RESPONSE METHOD, which are the rules governing the rules when a Writer reads his or her essay to the writers.

RESPONSE METHOD

Discussion Begins

1. **Readers will tell the Writer what we like about the essay.** Keep comments focused on the writing and **on praise.** In other words, Readers need to stay away from “I liked this part, **but.**” No “buts” allowed! Readers also need to stay away from “You should....” as well.

2. **The Writer will tell the Readers how he or she would like us to help him or her.** If the Writer is unsure, ask her questions from the Hierarchy of Concerns. As soon as the Writer identifies one or two areas, write those areas on the board and remind the Readers these are the only areas on which they can comment. For example, if a Writer says

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1 See page 20.
he or she wants to work on focus and development, then comment regarding organization, sentence style, or paragraphs are off limits.

FOCUS QUESTIONS: Do you think you got your main point across? Do you want to hear what people think your main point is?

DEVELOPMENT QUESTIONS: Are there areas where you think you might need more description?

ORGANIZATION QUESTIONS: Are you comfortable with how you organized your essay?

PARAGRAPH and TRANSITION QUESTIONS: Do you want the Readers to check connections between your paragraphs? Do you want readers to look at making sure there is only one scene or one idea in each paragraph?

SENTENCE AND GRAMMAR QUESTIONS: Do you want Readers to look at grammar or sentence style?

3. **Readers will ask questions (beginning with How, Why, or What) to support the Writer in those ways and engage in a dialogue with Writer.** For example, a Reader may think a paragraph is confusing. Instead of saying, “this is confusing,” encourage Readers to ask the Writer a question that would help clarify the confusion. As a test, ask the Readers: Would the questions they asked help them improve their essays? If the Reader makes a statement, ask her to try making it into a question. Then give the Writer a chance to answer the question. Ask
the Writer if he or she thinks the essay would be better if that information were included.

**TO INTEGRATE MORE WRITING OR TO GET COMMUNITY DISCUSSION MOVING:**

1. When the Writer finishes reading, ask Readers to write what they think the main point of the essay is.

2. Ask Readers to write two elements they liked about this essay, and note specific locations within the text. Why does the Reader like them?

3. Ask Readers to write questions about the writing in the essay beginning with How, Why, or What?
HIERARCHY OF CONCERNS

1) Thesis/Focus

2) Development Of Ideas

3) Overall Organization Of The Essay


5) Sentence Issues: Style And Mechanics.

Hierarchy refers to the chronological order in which each of these elements should be addressed when helping writers revise, not the weight or degree of importance of each element.

To respond to writer writing, select one or two of these concerns, and respond to them in the order in which they are presented here as the essay requires. If the essay presents 1) a solid thesis or focus, then respond to 2) development and 3) organization; however, if the essay does not present 1) a solid thesis or focus, then respond to 1) thesis or focus and 2) development only.