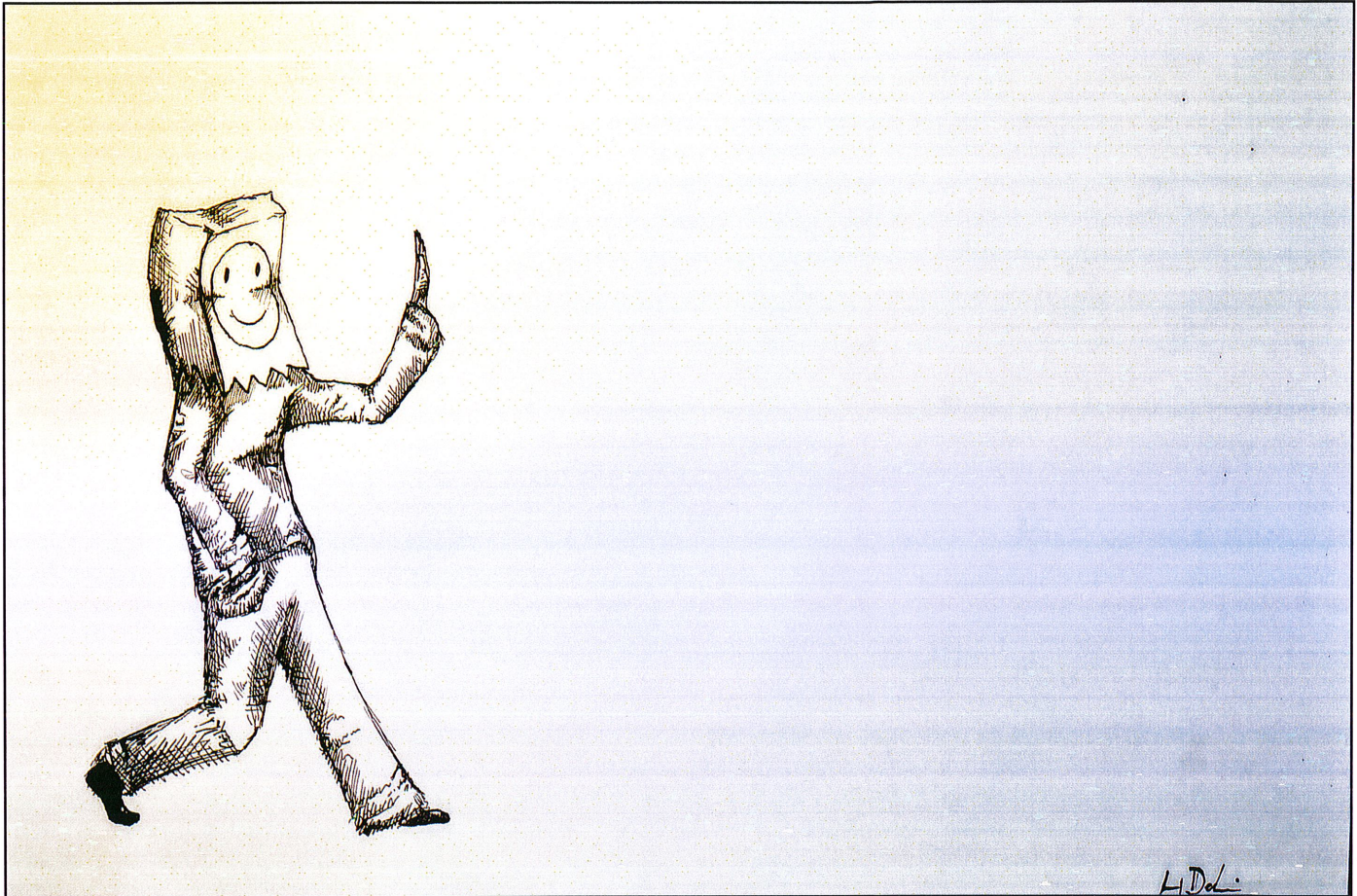


# Statement

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# ELA in the 21st Century Stories Will Keep us Human



Philippe Ernewein is the Dean of Faculty Training & Development at Denver Academy. Learn more about his latest project, a teacher training video titled, "How Are You Smart? What Students with Learning Differences Are Teaching Us" at his website [www.rememberit.org](http://www.rememberit.org).

by Philippe Ernewein

*"Sun come up it was blue and gold  
Ever since I put your picture in a frame."  
-Tom Waits, "Picture in a Frame" from  
Mule Variations*

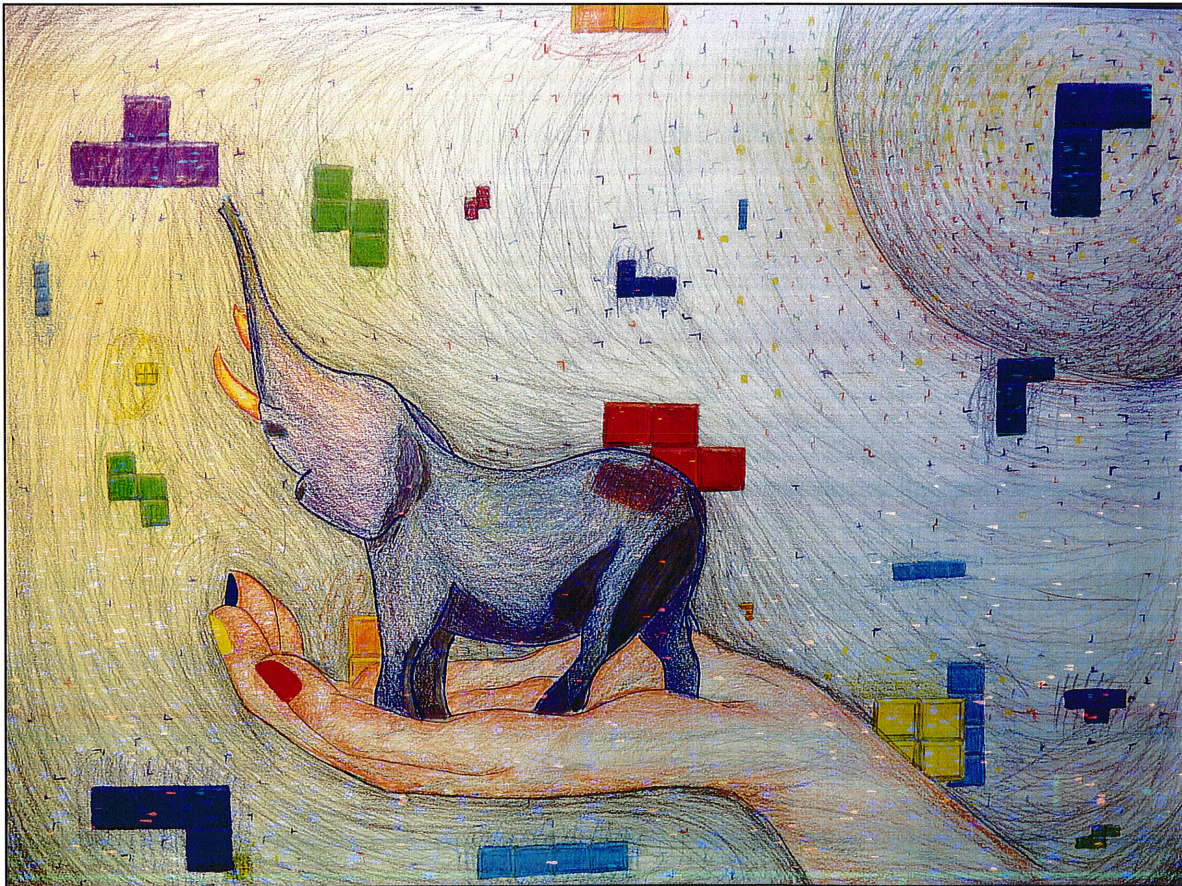
A good friend of mine and fellow educator, Matt, recently shared a story that brought my mind and thinking right back to the language arts classroom. Snap. This often happens, a curse, or a blessing perhaps; I leave the classroom at the end of the day, but the classroom, and my students, don't seem to leave my mind. Matt's story resonated with me. It was a reminder of a critical ingredient that we as educators need to make sure we include in our recipes of lesson plans and unit organizers.

Matt found an old typewritten letter, more than twenty years old. It was written to him for his 21st birthday by his father, now many years deceased. The faded letter spoke of life transitions: seeing his son moving into adulthood and lamenting the opportunities he felt he missed as a father who traveled for his work. His dad also wrote of specific examples of the magical times they did have together.

He told Matt how proud he was of him as a son.

Matt had long forgotten about the letter, tucked away in a shoebox with relics from college. He threw out the old notes and papers from school, but he kept the letter; his wife put the letter in a frame.

After reading the letter myself, it was clear to me that the contents, the message contained in the letter, is a vi-





tal part of Matt's story. It is part of the fabric that makes up his character. This is part of the story that cannot be downloaded. There are no zeros and ones that will replicate this story for infinity. The letter is one of one. Authentic. Original. Real.

These are the descriptors I want my students to use when they talk and think about their own writing.

And my mind turns back to the classroom and specifically an idea that I learned about from Marshall Ganz, a lecturer at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. Ganz has written extensively about the power and importance of story. He has even gone so far as to say that those of us in public work, like teachers, have a responsibility to offer a public account of who we are, why we do what we do and where we hope to lead. Matt's framed letter and the words of wisdom it contained would be a great starting point for him to think about his public story, his teacher story.

Ganz writes, "Some people say, 'I don't want to talk about myself,' but if you don't interpret to others your calling and your reason for doing what you're doing, do you think it will just stay uninterpreted? No. Other people will interpret it for you" (Ganz).

While Ganz is thinking here in the framework of leaders and politicians, the connection to teachers is easy to make. Teachers are the instructional leaders in their classroom; they are actively involved in public work.

Ganz's recipe for this public narrative starts with the *Story of Self*. He explains the importance here:

You have to claim authorship of your story and learn to tell it to others so they can understand the values that move you to act, because it might move them to act as well.

We all have a *story of self*. What's utterly unique about each of us is not the categories we belong to; what's utterly unique to us is our own journey of learning to be a full human being, a faithful person. And those journeys are never easy. They have their challenges, their obstacles, their crises. We learn to overcome them, and because of that we have lessons to teach. In a sense, all of us walk around with a text from which to teach, the text of our own lives (Ganz).

The text, the content that each of us walks around with, is of course vast and diverse. It is left up to the individual author to decide what that public narrative will include. He proposes a simple series of questions to start the thinking for the *Story of Self*:

- Identify a challenge you've encountered in your life.
- What were the choices you made when you were faced with this obstacle?
- What were the results?

For Ganz the *Story of Self* is the first of three components, the other parts are *Story of Us* and the *Story of Now*.

The *Story of Us* can best be summed up by asking the question, "What experiences and values do we share as a community that call us to what we are called to?" I have found that successful classrooms often capture these *Stories of Us*, perhaps without specifically naming them as Ganz does. There are classrooms I've observed, from elementary to high school, that not only acknowledge the collective group, but also find ways to celebrate the diverse backgrounds, interests and readiness-levels found in each classrooms. That's the *Story of Us*, focusing on similarities and common experiences held by a group, in the case of teachers, our classrooms.

In explaining the third part of the story cycle, Ganz writes, "After developing our *Stories of Self*, then we work on building relationships, which forms the *Story of Us*. From there we turn to strategizing and action, working together to achieve a common purpose, learning to experience hope—that's the story of now" (Ganz).

I have also seen examples in classrooms where teachers are able to capture the *Story of Now*; their students are acutely aware and invested in the challenge and wonder of the content they'll be learning and grappling with. To borrow from Wiggins & McTighe, these classrooms are engaged with seeking answers to the essential questions and creating frameworks for enduring understandings. Because the instructional leader of the classroom has set the purpose and created connections beyond the walls of the classroom, the students sense the urgency and importance of the now.

The *Story of Us* and *Now* however are difficult to reach without first authoring the *Story of Self*. This demands reflection. It implores that we step off the merry-go-round of the everyday routine and pause to interrogate ourselves with these questions. Authoring our own stories will help us maneuver through the bombardment of images and stories in media that report on what teachers are supposed to be and do.

I firmly believe that carving out this time to reflect and think about matters of the soul, ideals and our purpose is a necessary component of effective professional development. Along with other key training in our content area, technology and strategies, composing our *Story of Self* will make us better teachers (or possibly highlight that we have selected the wrong profession).

Over the summer the teachers at Denver Academy had the assignment of composing their *Stories of Self*. During our first week back of professional development training teachers shared their stories. It was a powerful and invigorating activity. The stories we shared mattered; reading the stories in small groups felt like a sort of sacrament. Bonds and partnerships were established or strengthened between teachers. Some teachers brought in artifacts like pictures or objects to supplement the sharing of their stories.

The seeds that were planted at the beginning of the year during the training are starting to take root across campus.



A number of teachers brought this idea back to their classrooms and assigned similar writing for their students. In conferencing with a number of students it was clear that the assignment was having a similar and powerful impact, but in a slightly different way. For that students I met with, their writing evolved into their *Stories As Learners*. They identified challenges they had encountered while learning or in school, wrote about the choices they made and the outcomes that resulted from those decisions.

During a writing conference this morning with Jackson, an 11th grader, he asked me if being called “lazy, crazy and stupid” in elementary school constituted a challenge. I said it did and asked him to elaborate. He went on to say that he wasn’t diagnosed with dyslexia until 9th grade and wanted to write about that as well. “I think if my 4th grade teacher knew I had dyslexia, maybe they would have been able to teach me better.” Our conversation turned to advocacy, learning strategies and even forgiveness. Jackson said he doesn’t hold a grudge against his 4th grade teacher; “I wasn’t the easiest kid to have in class back then.”

Jackson wasn’t writing about his summer vacation or an essay illuminating the themes he found in his summer reading (although both types of writing may have their place); his writing and thinking was real. It involved heavy cognitive lifting. His reflection amazed (and I told him so).

The *Story of Self* provided a framework, a way for him to archive his specific learning experience. I could never

have specifically assigned Jackson to write and deeply reflect about his 4th grade experience, but the questions Ganz offers act like a roadmap that can help move students toward honestly starting to draft their own stories. And after they’ve found the words to shape and tell their stories, I firmly believe our students will have a stronger sense of who they are as learners and individuals.

With *Stories of Self* intact and in-draft, we could even reach out to the tools of digital media to help us tell the story.

So what does the *Story of Self* have to do with navigating the 21st century digital waters that seem to be ever-present and ever-growing? I believe that stories will help keep us human; our stories are reminders that not everything we need to know can be found by the right combination of words in a search engine.

*“I love you baby and I always will  
Ever since I put your picture in a frame.”*

-Tom Waits, “Picture in a Frame” from the  
album *Mule Variations*

### **Works Cited**

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