

## **Excavating Untold Stories: Personal Experience in the English Classroom**

By Ryan M. Dooley, Taft High School, Chicago, Illinois, 2017

### **Overview:**

One of the many striking ideas that I took away from this workshop, was the idea of “excavating untold stories”. The concept that too often personal narratives, particularly of societies “undesirable elements” are lost because they are painful, because they are not represented in dominant popular culture, not represented in academic culture, or simply because stories like people are pushed to the margins. Additionally, I am struck by how personal narrative and documentary theatre methods empower those that are interviewed, how universal personal narratives can be for listeners/readers, and how powerful they can be as tools of understanding, community building and of empathy. As such, below is an exploration of using these tools and methods to decentralize knowledge in my classroom, empower my students, and pay homage to their community stories, their family stories, and their individual stories. As Ping Chong said, “All islands connect underwater”.

### **Method #1 - An Oral History of Chicago**

I’m working on building a new course for my school specific to the Literature of Chicago. Before this institute, my plans were based solely around published and canonized authors like Gwendolyn Brooks, Studs Terkel, Sandra Cisneros and Nelson Algren. Now, I want to incorporate a unit on untold stories from my students own communities, and their own lives.

To do so we would:

1. Watch a video performance of Undesirable Elements.
2. Students would complete questionnaire packets.
3. Students would interview each other in groups of 3.
4. Students would write a short script, narrative or poem based on their peer’s packet and/or interview.
5. Students perform these short pieces in chronological order based on the year the event occurred.
6. Students would draft their own set of questions specific to “sense of place”, incorporating immigrant identities, ethnic identities, national identities, city (Chicago) identity, neighborhood identity, and family identity.
7. Students would interview at least 2 people with these packets.
8. Students would write a short script, narrative or poem based on their interview.
9. We would have an after-school community performance of these pieces in the auditorium or library.

**Focus:** Essentially, the goal of this unit would be re-canonizing the people’s narratives of Chicago, while teaching students essential elements of documentary theatre, as well as reinforcing oral histories, and student’s home culture as valuable, and universal.

### **Method #2- Immigrant Memoir in AP Language**

I teach an AP Language & Composition course that focuses on nonfiction & rhetoric. As I reflected on the texts used in this institute I considered how powerful the memoir and personal narrative are as forms of empathy building. I realized how too often in my AP Language course I'm using journalism from a third person perspective to convey the experience of those in society who are too often "othered", including immigrants, as opposed to hearing their voices tell their own story. As such, this year I am going to create a memoir unit incorporating selections from the following texts:

*The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston

*Angela's Ashes* by Frank McCourt

*Reading Lolita In Tehran* by Azar Nafisi

*Me Talk Pretty One Day* by David Sedaris

*Dust Tracks on A Road* by Zora Neale Hurston

*The Distance Between Us: A Memoir* by Reyna Grande

*My Sister's Mother: A Memoir of War, Exile and Stalin's Siberia* by Donna Solecka Urbikas

*East Eats West* by Andrew Lam

**Focus:** The instruction here will focus on self-discovery, intersectionality, experience as a form of knowledge, and writing techniques/style. We will look at short selections of these texts to see how author's approached the exploration of their identity, and how they used stylistic choices effectively. These text selections will operate as models for students as they will be required to compose their own pieces of memoir writing using 1-2 techniques modeled by the authors.