

## **Performing Personal Memories - Ping Chong in the Classroom**

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Using personal experiences and performance to build community and inspire writing

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### **My Inspiration**

During our summer institute, I really enjoyed connecting with others in our group daily through small performance activities. Sara Katz led us in opening and closing most sessions with a variety of activities, all of which brought our group closer each day. Even though our institute was only two weeks, I feel sure that we formed more of a bond and true connection with each other than other institutes that don't involve as much physical activity and performance. After the institute, I spent a lot of time thinking about how these simple activities really had great impact on the participants and the connection we felt. I resolved to use the activities early and often as this school year began. My students have loved learning the snap game. Instead of just calling out names from the roster, we did many rounds of fun circle naming activities to learn each other's names and backgrounds.

### **Unit Overview**

This unit is one of the first that I taught this year. We read two short stories that both involve characters making decisions. Students read and studied "The Bass, the River, and Sheila Mant" by W. D. Weatherell and "Everyday Use" by Alice Walker. Both texts ask questions about identity. The following lessons begin towards the end of the study of the second story. This unit overlaps with the literature, but then finishes on its own. In North Carolina, all students write argument, informational, and narrative papers. The goal of this unit is to build community at the beginning of the semester through performance. The performances also help students generate ideas for their narrative writing, which we draft and craft post-performance.

### **Ongoing Activities:**

Throughout the unit, we begin every class with a simple or fun game. The snap game, cross the circle, zip/zap/zop, etc. These activities are fun and low-risk. Playing a quick fun game each day ensures that when we get to the actual performances, students are used to getting in a circle or line and interacting with each other in these ways. If you don't get them involved with each other earlier, then it can be a little awkward if you just ask them to get up and start sharing memories and clapping in strange ways.

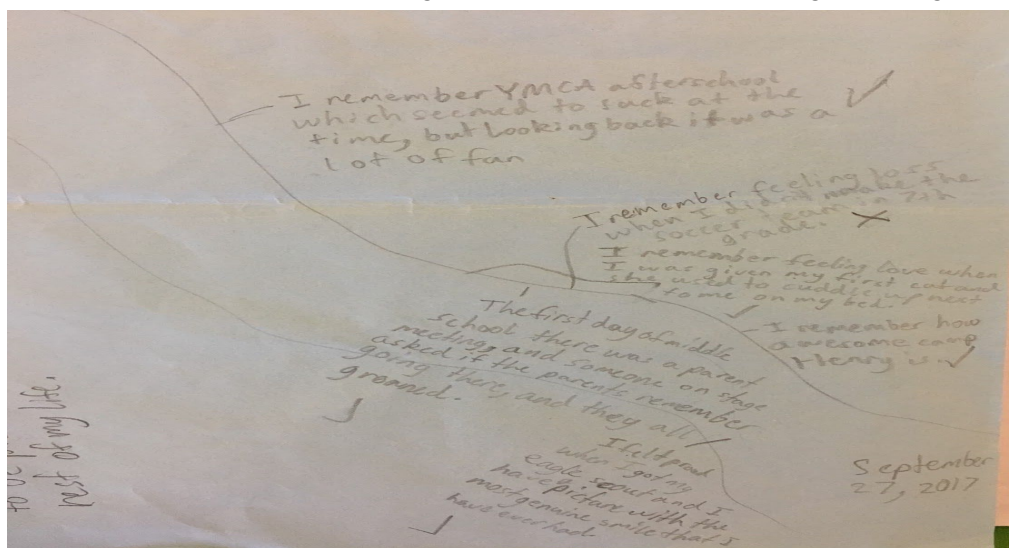
### **Activity #1 - Identifying Key Events and Character Emotions**

- After we read both texts, we have a discussion about each story and its characters. We discuss what events in each story really impacted the characters and how. We also write about and discuss how each character feels at different times in the text and why. This review gives students an idea of where we are headed. It starts them thinking

about events that impact people and about feelings that stay with a person long after the event is over.

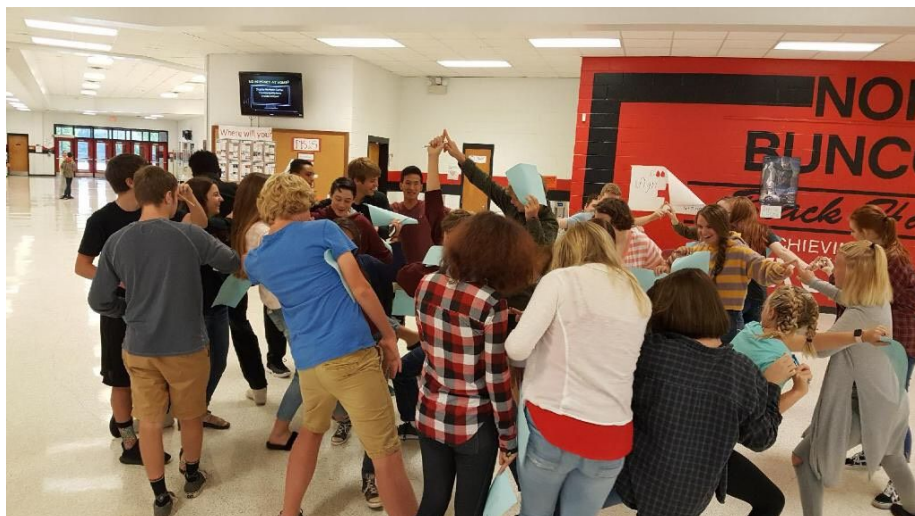
## Activity #2 - Creating the River Map

- Students get a blue sheet of paper (seems cute...water, river, and all!) and draw a river diagonally on the page.
- They label their birthday on one side and the current date on the other end.
- I explain to students that the river represents their lives and stories. As we build the map, they will try their best to keep things in chronological order.
- On the first day, we only add one event, I felt happy when... Students locate and mark the date and write a small blurb about the time when they felt happy.
- I collect the maps every day and read over what students put, commenting if needed. My comments just praise and talk with the students. Looking at these maps early in the semester really helps me get to know the students, their backgrounds and stories.
- Each day after that, we pass out the maps and add one or two dates/events/feelings.
- I use many of the prompts that Sara used with us during the NEH workshop, and I added some of my own:
  - I felt happy when...
  - I felt sad when...
  - I felt scared when...
  - I remember the first day of school...
  - I remember feeling proud when...
  - I remember wanting....
  - I felt excited when....
  - I felt confused when...
  - I felt hurt when...
- During the creation of the map, it's just like journaling. We aren't sharing yet. Sometimes kids who are close might talk a bit, but this is about generating ideas.



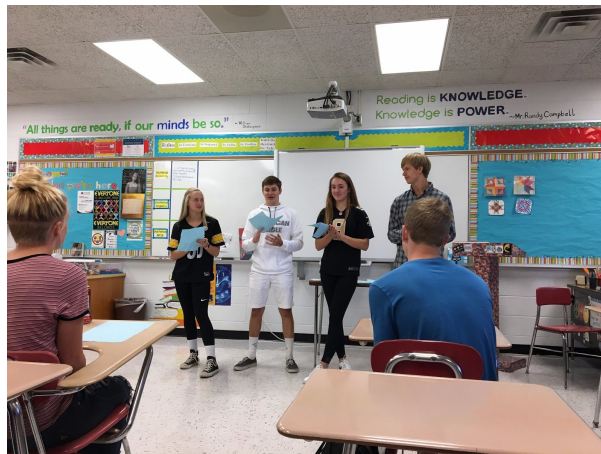
### Activity #3 - Sharing Memories

- Once the river maps are complete, we talk about the variety of kinds of memories that are on our maps.
- I tell students that they will be sharing some of these memories, but that they are safe to make their own choices about what they do or do not share.
- We've built community through playing warm up and theater games, so hopefully a safe environment is established.
- I instruct students to go through each memory on their map. Put a CHECK beside any memory they are willing to share with their classmates, and put an X by any memory they do NOT want to share.
- Once they have determined what they do and do not want to share, I ask them to CHOOSE ONE of their checked memories for today's activity. We have a brief discussion about consent, since we will be touching classmates during the game.
- We go out of the classroom to the commons or outside and get into a circle. Students know their memory and we share in three rounds using the E.T. game (not sure if it has a better name...this is all I can remember).
- Students mill about and wander around the space. I call "freeze!" and they freeze. They turn to whoever is closest to them, and this person is their ET partner. Students touch fingertips and share their memory with their ET partner.
- For round two, students mill about the space again and I call "freeze!" They find another student who is near them, and this is their elbow partner. They touch elbows. They share stories. Before the next round I ask them to look around and find their ET partner and to point to him/her. Then I ask them to look back at their elbow partner.
- Round three - same pattern - mill around and freeze! This final partner is your tippy toe partner. They touch toes/shoes and share their memory with a third partner.
- Final Fun! Keeping their toes with their toe partner, I tell them to move and shift so that they are also touching their elbow partner. Then, see if they can also touch fingers with their ET partner!!! Can they do it?? Of course!!



#### Activity #4 - Creating Performance from Personal Memories

- After sharing, you can have students write down what they learned about their classmates.
- I put students into groups of 4 or 5 and we learn how to take our memories and create small performances.
- Students choose a memory and write their impact statement:
  - They list the year, prompt, one sentence memory, and impact statement (because of this I...)
- They work with their groups to create and practice their performances.
- Students get into chronological order. They practice the following pattern:
  - Student: Year
  - Group: Year
  - Student: I remember feeling \_\_\_\_\_. I \_\_\_\_\_. (and student describes memory.
  - REPEAT this process for each kid in the group.
  - Final Round, each student gives their impact statement.
- Groups perform for the rest of the class. It's fun and great!! We learn about each other!!
- Personal Note: I was impressed and encouraged by how much my students shared with each other. I did not coach them at all about what they should choose to share, and believe it or not, we had a great mix of serious, funny, happy, and sad memories. Students listened and respected each other and their stories.



#### Activity #5 - Writing Your Personal Narrative

- From here, we select one of our memories and write a personal narrative just as you would any year in English class. Narrative writing is a part of our curriculum. The performance project helped students generate more meaningful ideas than they had in past semesters. The performances also built trust between students that was valuable later as students share their writing with each other during drafting and editing stages.

**Extension Possibilities** - My goal moving forward would be to then take the written narratives and build longer Ping Chong *Undesirable Elements* style performances from the more detailed stories. I am also interested in adding an interview component to the project.