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## Writing Lives: A Model for Student Engagement

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What is the function of story-telling and story-writing in the post-secondary classroom? The Writing Lives course, which ran from September 2016 to April 2018 at Langara College in Vancouver BC, Canada, was a project that partnered Langara, the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre (VHEC), and the Toronto-based Azrieli Foundation to explore the value of stories in higher education. Writing Lives brought together students, educators, community members, and other participants to research and write the memoirs of Jewish Holocaust survivors.

### Project Overview and Context

The VHEC approached Rachel Mines, Langara English instructor, to develop and teach a Holocaust memoir project at Langara College. The Langara project was based on the Sustaining Memories course, designed by the Azrieli Foundation and initially offered through Ryerson University in Toronto, Canada (Ryerson, 2012).

Writing Lives was a two-semester project that Langara's English Department offered to second-year students. In the first semester, students learned about the Holocaust through lectures and discussions focused on historical and literary texts. In the second semester, teams of students partnered with Vancouver-area Holocaust survivors to interview them and write memoirs of their lives before, during, and after the Holocaust. Recorded interviews and written memoirs were archived by the Azrieli Foundation, and both Azrieli and the VHEC provided program support. Students earned university transfer credits in either English or History.

The Writing Lives project provided an opportunity to engage a variety of participants, including Langara faculty and staff, the College's institutional partners, subject

experts, Holocaust survivors, and students. While each of these participant groups is a topic of interest in its own right, this paper will focus on the project's benefits to students. We will consider Leggo's (2011) notion of the generative power of storytelling and Arendt's (1959) conception of a public realm as useful frameworks for understanding student engagement in this project.

As an educational tool, storytelling opens up possibilities for connections, insights, and questions, with the act of narration being a generative one. Leggo (2011) refers to possibilities of meaning that are revealed through the telling of stories. The storyteller is in a constant process of creating the story and paying attention to how it might be told. In the Writing Lives project, multiple participants experienced this creative act of hearing, telling, and making meaning of stories.

In *The Human Condition* (1959), Arendt explores, among other things, the vital roles of speech and action in creating meaning. Arendt refers to human plurality, the notion that, as members of a society, we live among other people but each of us is distinct and can act in unexpected ways. To overcome the isolation and atomization of living in the private realm, and to avoid the preconditions for totalitarianism in the contemporary world, Arendt suggests that people in "the web of human relationships" (p. 296) can come together in a public realm to share and exchange speech and action. Public dialogue can play a key role in creating and maintaining a public realm, from which action conducive to human improvement can occur. Arendt privileges "the revelatory character of action as well as the ability to produce stories and become historical, which together form the very source from which meaningfulness springs into and illuminates human existence" (pp. 296-297).

The Writing Lives project established a public realm for students to engage with the Holocaust as they learned

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in the classroom, developed relationships with survivors, listened to their stories, and recreated the stories as memoirs.

### Goals and Learning Objectives

During the first semester, students developed a multi-perspective understanding of Jewish and non-Jewish European society before, during, and after the Holocaust. The history of the Holocaust was examined in part by analyzing the roles of perpetrators, bystanders, victims, and survivors. To facilitate a nuanced understanding of the power relationships in play, a curriculum of history, politics, social psychology, memoirs, and creative literature was used. This interdisciplinary approach offered students “the capacity to integrate knowledge of two or more disciplines to produce a cognitive advancement in ways that would have been impossible or unlikely through a single disciplinary means” (Spelt, Biemans, Tobi, Luning, & Mulder, 2009, p. 365). Furthermore, interdisciplinary learning broadened students’ understanding of the significance of the events they were studying, what Leggo (2011) would identify as the “so what?” dynamic of storytelling, by allowing students to examine their ideas from various perspectives. The first semester thus provided students with a solid foundation for the second semester, in which their interviews with Holocaust survivors took place.

Much of the learning in the first semester was delivered through classroom lectures, discussions, and writing assignments, but students also used resources housed in the VHEC and Vancouver’s Jewish public library to research the history of a prewar European Jewish community. Groups of students worked collaboratively, using specialized print and online resources, to write a history of that community.

Learning outcomes of the first semester included outlining the historical events and psychological impacts of the Holocaust, analyzing literature and memoirs in relation to Holocaust-related themes, and understanding individual responsibility and agency in relation to past and current world events. Students were evaluated by means of their research projects, reading reviews, reflective journals, and exams. The interdisciplinary approach used, the emphasis on student-centered critical reflection and engagement, and the emergence of a public realm in which students could freely exchange their ideas prepared students for the second semester by developing their capacity to engage effectively with survivors.

In the second semester, students were assigned to groups of three or four members. Each group was partnered with a Holocaust survivor. Students received specialized classroom training in interviewing Holocaust survivors (Ringelheim, Donahue, Hedlund, & Rubin, 2007). They also learned strategies for the various stages of the writing and revising processes, with the aim of producing continuous, readable narratives of 30-60 pages that maintained the interviewee’s voice and perspective.

Classroom instruction was given by way of traditional lectures as well as workshops led by subject experts.

Outside the classroom, each group of students was responsible for establishing and maintaining a relationship with its survivor partner. Student groups were also responsible for organizing the interview and writing process, including scheduling interviews; booking interview rooms; liaising with fellow students, instructors, the interviewee, and the VHEC; and problem-solving. The instructor supported each group by maintaining close contact using email and face-to-face meetings, stressing the importance of a team effort to the project’s successful completion. In this semester, the project-based learning approach afforded students the opportunity to hone their problem-solving and metacognitive skills and to interrogate their attitudes to learning (Prince & Felder, 2006, p. 131). Through dialogue with others, students were drawn into a shared experience. The activities of the second semester focused on the rhetoric of storytelling, “the art and science of shaping and constructing a story for communicating to others” (Leggo, 2011, p. 1).

The second semester’s learning outcomes included planning and conducting the oral history interviews; cooperating with team members to transcribe, organize, draft, and revise the written memoir; and producing a memoir that reflected the interviewee’s voice and experience while drawing upon students’ knowledge and critical thinking skills. Student evaluation was based on journals and meeting notes, a writing quiz, a memoir draft, and the final memoir.

At the end of the academic year, students, survivor volunteers, Langara faculty and administration, project partners, guests, and media representatives were invited to a closing ceremony in which students formally presented their completed memoirs to the survivor they interviewed. Students, survivors, and other participants were honored for their efforts to preserve the Holocaust legacy for survivors, their families and descendants, and local and international teachers and researchers. This emotional event brought home to all participants, and particularly to the students, the power of stories when shared in a public realm and their ability to give positive meaning to the lives of others.

### Practical Considerations

Practical considerations of the Writing Lives project included identifying Vancouver-area survivors who wished to participate, maintaining privacy of personal information, training students and supporting all participants during the interview process, and liaising with subject experts and institutional partners.

The success of the Writing Lives project depended on the survivors and their willingness to participate. Prospective volunteers were identified by the VHEC, which served as the primary point of contact between Langara and the survivors and provided guidance to the survivors before and during the interview process.

At Langara, the Writing Lives project was reviewed and approved by the college's Research Ethics Board, and participants were bound by standard rules of confidentiality to maintain the privacy of all participants. Risks were identified, including the possibility of participants experiencing anxiety or stress during the interview process. Strategies for supporting participants were outlined (for example, familiarizing students with Langara's counseling services), and this information was shared in writing with survivors and students before interviews commenced. For the survivors' protection, students were required to complete a criminal records check. Students were then assigned to their workgroups. Two students in each group attended the interviews. Remaining group members were primarily responsible for transcribing, researching, and writing.

Students were counseled to view the interview and memoir-writing process as a journey they would take with the interviewee, one that requires a degree of self awareness. They were encouraged to understand from inside the story using their senses, so probing for detail could involve asking questions about the interviewee's memory of colors, smells, tastes, and sounds. The primary aim of the interview was for students to listen, document, and bear witness to the survivor's personal testimony while reflecting on the moral questions raised by the journey. In both the interview and the writing processes, storytelling and dialogue played a role in creating the conditions that, according to Arendt (1959), give meaning to human existence.

The Azrieli Foundation and the VHEC provided specific interview strategies, including suggestions on making the initial contact with the survivor partner, building rapport during the first interview, and asking open-ended questions, for example "Could you tell me about your parents?" and "How did you feel about that?" (David, 2012). Students were given a detailed schedule of steps for following up after each interview and preparing for the next session. To help students focus and plan each interview, the Azrieli Foundation provided them a preliminary interview survivor questionnaire organized around prewar, wartime, and postwar themes (Azrieli Foundation, n.d.).

Based on the US Holocaust Memorial Museum approach to oral history (Ringelheim, Donahue, Hedlund, & Rubin, 2007), students were encouraged to view the interview process as an art rather than a science. Experienced interviewers of Holocaust survivors point out that a good interview is a two-way process in which "trust and collaboration are nurtured so that candor and depth may develop" (Zembrzycki & High, 2012, p. 412). Students were encouraged to find their own interview style that would allow the interviewees to tell their stories in their own ways. VHEC outreach speakers and educators talked to the class about working with Holocaust survivors while subject experts offered strategies to conduct and transcribe interviews. The Azrieli Foundation provided voice recorders and training materials. The course instructor led writing workshops on organizing a long

manuscript and editing for clarity and flow. Students were coached on working with their survivor partners during the vetting and revision process, giving authority to the survivor to determine the final form the memoir would take. For Leggo (2011), the action of shaping a narrative is "an ongoing process of understanding how we invest space and chronology with significance" (p. 15). The often fragmented stories that were shared in this safe, interpersonal space were transformed into powerful, continuous narratives with the potential to make an impact on students, survivors, other project participants, and the general community.

## Methodology

In order to assess the project's impact on students, various kinds of formal and informal feedback were examined, including students' reflective journals from both semesters, course evaluations, and verbal feedback provided to the instructor. This form of data collection — focusing on the stories students tell about the project — allows the analysis of first-hand accounts of the student experience. Leggo (2011) outlines three principal dynamics involved in narrative inquiry: story (what happened), interpretations (assigning meaning) and discourse (communicating to others). Students' experiences in the Writing Lives project were captured in the facts they described, their reflections on the significance of these facts, and the ways they chose to describe their experiences.

## Results

Analysis of the project's impact on students was guided by the central question: "how do students describe their own experience of being involved in the project?" The stories students told about their experience were examined in terms of the creation of a common space for public dialogue and the connections students established between storytelling and meaningful action.

Many students described having developed personally and academically as a result of participating in the Writing Lives project, as typified by this end-of-term evaluation: "In this course, I was able to collaborate with other students more than I ever had in any other course. I have learned new problem-solving skills, and I had the opportunity to strengthen my interpersonal skills and gain confidence speaking in front of others. I feel my writing skills are now stronger." Similarly, another student wrote, "I did indeed learn a lot about the Holocaust and the lives of survivors, but to my pleasant surprise, I learned a lot more than I expected. I also learned a lot about working with others. Part of working with other people means being flexible and letting go of tenacity. Our three voices mixed together was not a competition to see whose can be loudest, but more like each person showing their angle to make the final picture more stunning." A third student's sense of pride and empowerment is captured in this journal entry:

“By working with A, I felt like I was making an impact on someone else’s life, like I was useful. ... I feel stronger after this course, and more prepared to pursue my academic path to a career in social work or psychology.”

The Writing Lives project increased students’ desire and capacity to speak and act in the world. One student was motivated to continue working over the summer with the survivor she had been partnered with to help him produce a longer memoir. A number of students who participated in the project’s first year volunteered to help students in the second year. Students offered excerpts from their journal entries and other writings for publication in the VHEC’s newsletter *Zachor*, Vancouver’s *Jewish Independent* newspaper, and Langara’s student newspaper, the *Langara Voice*. In the first year of the project, Pamela Post, a journalist and Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) Radio documentarian, worked with students to create a documentary on Writing Lives, which aired on CBC Radio’s The Doc Project (Post, 2017) and was rebroadcast on November 11, 2018. Writing Lives students also shared their experiences in college forums, exhibitions, and café readings.

Many students conceived of their project experience as overtly political and suggested the lasting public impact of their involvement, as seen in the following comments:

- I cannot express how grateful I am to have had the opportunity to meet these survivors, document their stories, and ensure that their experiences will never be forgotten.
- Our sacred duty is to empower the ones who can no longer empower themselves, and the key to making sure history never repeats itself is to tell their stories.
- The responsibility of writing this memoir was a privilege. I feel that I have made a significant contribution to the world. From now on, I can look back at my life and know that I can be proud of myself for the work I put into this project. I am grateful.

### Lessons Learned

The Writing Lives project provided a powerful opportunity for student engagement and proved to be a demanding, yet rewarding, experience for all involved. The project’s success involved a number of challenges that required sufficient resources of time, creativity, energy, and foresight on the part of participants.

Considerable time must be allotted for the instructor to set up and maintain a project of this type, and relationships with institutional and community partners are critical to success. As well as the usual classroom responsibilities, the instructor must set aside time to establish relationships and liaise with a network of project partners. Time must also be allocated for supporting

students and linking them to educational and community resources.

Students also face practical challenges. They must travel to specialized libraries and learn on- and offline research strategies in a subject area and culture with which they may be entirely unfamiliar. They must also learn interview strategies, plan their interviews, meet and establish a bond with their interviewee, conduct a series of interviews, and create a written memoir that will satisfy their interviewee, their instructor, and themselves.

The Writing Lives project also deeply affected the survivor partners, sometimes in unexpected ways. As might be expected, several survivors, in their spoken and written reflections, commented on the bonds formed between themselves and their student interviewers. Furthermore, as a result of the kinds of questions the student interviewers asked, some survivors were challenged to think about their lives in new ways. In his address at the Writing Lives closing ceremony, one survivor stated, “I have been interviewed a number of times by different people, of different levels of experience. So when I was asked if I was willing to be interviewed by some students from Langara, I thought, ‘Oh, well ... It’s not going to be very interesting. They are probably amateurs who don’t really know what they’re doing.’ My expectations were not fulfilled at all.... Some of the questions made me think about my own experiences in ways that I never have before” (as cited in Johnson, 2017).

### Conclusions

In each of the project’s two years, student feedback indicated that the Writing Lives project had empowered them personally, academically, and politically. A number reported that the project had been a life-changing experience.

Courses of this type provide powerful opportunities to engage students and nurture public dialogue. Langara College’s administration has expressed its support of Writing Lives, and steps are now underway to extend the model into a similar memoir-writing course based on First Nations history and culture.

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