

Chapter 58

Enhancing Health Education with Collaborative Narratives

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explains the lessons learned when an English professor and a physical therapist decided to work together. Patients in a clinic and students in a classroom share the need for positive role models to teach them effective strategies to enhance their learning. The official research journey focuses on the connections among writing, positive outlook, and healing. The unofficial journey focuses on the lessons learned from the authors teaching each other about their fields of expertise. They encourage readers to accomplish two tasks. First, think about how to get out of your personal comfort zone and change your outlook about the amount of stress in your life. Second, think about how to get out of your professional comfort zone and change your outlook about working with colleagues in other disciplines. By sharing their experiences, the authors provide ideas on how to participate in interdisciplinary collaborations with colleagues in school and community.

INTRODUCTION TO A SYNERGISTIC COLLABORATION

When writing meets medicine, exciting possibilities occur in the fields of patient education and teacher education. Dr. Jennifer Bird is an English professor and Dr. Eric Wanner is a physical therapist. We learned a significant amount about each other's fields through a research and writing project we designed together. Patients at Eric's physical therapy clinic used strategies from Jen's writing classroom as we studied how writing about emotions affected physical health. We want

our research and writing to continue to help the patients at Eric's clinic and the students in Jen's classroom.

Change takes courage. Most people live their lives never leaving their comfort zones. Johnson (2005) observes, "teaching superbly is like running a marathon by yourself in the dark. Few people even notice what you're doing, and those who notice don't pay much attention – but their oblivion doesn't slow you down. You still enjoy the thrill and satisfaction of finishing the race, and you are definitely a winner" (p. 5). But education doesn't have to be each teacher alone in a

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classroom, especially with technology that makes collaboration only an email away. Teachers tend to stay in their own classrooms; every once in a while they might venture down the hall to have a conversation with a colleague, but then they lock themselves back in the world of literary criticism. People often choose the safe route or the path of least resistance with their lives and with their health, even with new information, technology, and resources that could make their lives easier. At first glance it may seem unlikely that an English professor and a physical therapist would want to work together to create positive change in the lives of patients and students. Despite our divergent backgrounds, both of us share passion for research and compassion for people. We used this common ground to learn from each other and find trends between emotional writing and physical healing.

Each person has a story. Eben Alexander and Hilary Tindle are both medical doctors who advocate awareness of thoughts and feelings. Alexander, a neurosurgeon, (2012) believes, “true thought is pre-physical. This is the thinking-behind-the-thinking responsible for all the genuinely consequential choices we make in the world” (p. 84). He elaborates that it is “the subliminal thinking that is always there, when we really need it, but that we have all too often lost the ability both to access and to believe in” (pp. 84-85). Tindle, a doctor of internal medicine, (2013) also refers to mindfulness and explains, “this is called the triangle of awareness, in which we remain mentally centered in the midst of our thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations, each of which represents a point on the triangle” (p. 104). In her medical research, Tindle discovered that simple behavior changes could lead to better health, but most people never make changes. Tindle wondered what the script might be in the heads of the one percent of people who achieve ideal cardiac health.

To answer this question, thinking outside one’s field can prove beneficial. Writing teachers advocate for students to reflect on the script

in their heads by writing about their thoughts and feelings. Cameron, a writing teacher, (1998) explains, “when we write about our lives we respond to them ” (p. 94). She continues, “we are rendered conscious. Each day, each life, is a series of choices, and as we use the lens of writing to view our lives, we see our choices” (p. 94).

However, the domains of the writing classroom and the medical clinic don’t typically collide. One exception is the story Rasminsky (2012) presents of Rita Charon, a medical internist who also earned a PhD in literature and explains how “Charon is the founding director of the Program in Narrative Medicine at Columbia University, where future MDs participate in writing workshops” (p. 88). We also designed a collaboration between writing and medicine and learned lessons in working together that you can apply to your life, either when sharing ideas with colleagues from different subject areas or motivating a class of students to work together.

ONLY THE BEGINNING

Marilyn Kepler Bird loved her life. She felt it was her calling in life to be the caretaker of others. She changed the lives of her husband, daughter, parents, sister, niece, and even people she barely knew, such as the cashiers at the local Kroger store, with her kindness. She worried about everyone else before she worried about herself. She shared everything with her family except a notebook of her thoughts about her health they found too late to help her. She kept her stress level to herself. She died of a carotid artery aneurism. Jen is her daughter.

If we had done anything differently, would Marilyn still be here? That question haunted her family, and it led me (Jen) to become driven to help others. I couldn’t save my mom’s life, but I could try to save other lives by educating my colleagues and students about the dangers of being overwhelmed by stress.

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