

SPRING 2025

LEGACY

TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

Hannah Grieco

**When Teachers
Tell Their Stories,
Change Happens**



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When Teachers Tell Their Stories, Change Happens

Hannah Grieco, M.Ed., M.F.A., Writer, Editor, Advocate. Columnist, Washington City Paper, Adjunct Professor, Marymount University, Writing Instructor, The Writer's Center, Washington, DC

"When people translate their emotional experience into words, they may be changing the way it is organized in the brain."

-James Pennebaker

As teachers, we exist within the push-and-pull of educating vs caregiving. Yes, we're there to support the learning of our students, no matter their age. But we don't just teach subjects and skills. We also teach life lessons, as well. Where is the line between learning about Ancient Greece and learning how to communicate effectively? The line between learning to conjugate verbs and developing a healthy skepticism about online influencers? The line between solving for X and advocating for yourself in the classroom and beyond?

How does this tightrope walk impact us, as human beings who offer such complicated, layered forms of instruction and care?

I am an English professor, but I used to teach elementary school. The difference between six-year-olds and nineteen-year-olds is vast, but their needs are surprisingly similar. They need to feel safe in order to learn. They need to feel respected. They need lessons to be accessible, individualized, and interesting.

What about us, though? What do *we* need, as educators? As we work to support each of our classroom learners, how do we manage our own emotional experience when navigating challenges? Perhaps we face classroom behavior issues or an administrator we don't mesh well with. Perhaps we have a student who is struggling with mental health needs or trauma in the home. Perhaps there are disabilities we don't quite know how to support, or a new political landscape taking hold at our school. There are many "what ifs" in teaching and they all seem to end up as weights on the shoulders of us as teachers.

How can we process these experiences, find a sense of healing and purpose, and move forward in our work without burning out? Many of us are also looking to go beyond the classroom and make change on a larger scale. We want our schools to be better. We want to help *MORE* students. We want our teaching to be more effective, more kind, and more inclusive. How do we combine all of these goals and still get to sleep at night? One way to process, heal, and make change is to write about teaching. Not just articles and how-to pieces, but personal essays. Our stories, vulnerable and deeply relatable, can make big changes: both inside us and out there in the world.

I wrote about the healing nature of expressive writing for [Craft Literary](#), based on my research at graduate school:

In 1986 social psychologist James Pennebaker co-published a research study about the benefits of expressive writing in trauma recovery. His research involved university students writing about specific traumatic experiences for fifteen minutes, four times a week. The results were astonishing. The students who wrote their stories visited the campus student health center 50% less over the next six months versus the students in the control group.

"Many students came out of their writing rooms in tears, but they kept coming back. And, by the last day of the experiment, most reported that the experience had been profoundly important for them."



At the time, Pennebaker was focused on physical symptoms. And follow-up studies pointed to improved health as a result of this confessional-style writing. There seemed to be indicators that expressive writing could encourage healing in the therapeutic environment.

In 1997, Pennebaker wrote “[Writing About Emotional Experiences as a Therapeutic Process](#)”, in which he discussed the natural inclination of humans to tell their stories after an emotional upheaval. He noted that keeping secrets interfered with sleep, health, relationships, and performance at work or school. Hundreds of studies confirmed Pennebaker’s work over the following decades, including one that suggested that trauma actively damages the brain - but “when people translate their emotional experience into words, they may be changing the way it is organized in the brain.”

Now I’m not trying to suggest that teaching is a source of trauma. But it’s a mistake to assume we’re immune to the emotional impact of taking care of others. It’s exhausting, even as it’s exhilarating. Sometimes, it’s the greatest gift we’ve been given. Other times, we stumble home and crumple onto the sofa. Occasionally, we experience trauma. Often, we feel misunderstood and alone on this journey. There are so many things we wish parents and politicians knew about the classroom and about the pedagogical choices we make. There are so many times that we wish we could just pull those people in to observe.

Look at me love your child! Look at me patiently explain this over and over! Look at me take a quick bathroom break so I don’t lose it, then come back and start all over again. I’m here, fighting the good fight to support and care for these students. Don’t you see?

We need them to see. We need to know that we’re not alone on this path. One essay in a newspaper, one poem in a literary journal, and all of a sudden: we are seen. Our needs are more real to them, our students more than just numbers on a page. The key to this transformation in thinking is our own storytelling. Where facts and figures hit a brick wall, sometimes a story of our lived experience can break through.



So where do we begin? We start by asking ourselves: Why am I writing this piece?

- To inform?
- To connect to others or help to establish community?
- To convince people of something that I believe?
- To make people laugh or feel good?
- To make an experience more real for others who may not have experienced it before?
- To change something that must be changed?
- To help people?

Then we ask

Is this my story? Is this about my life and experience, and my students and their experiences play important parts in the story? Or is this a story primarily about THEIR experience(s), thus their story to tell?

We ask

Does this story elevate my students, portray even very hard things in a hopeful, generous, and kind light? Or is this embarrassing, shameful, blaming, or overly negative?

We ask

If my student reads this piece...how will they feel?

Will they feel seen?

Will they feel loved?

Will they feel cared for?

Also, we can be particularly thoughtful when writing about students with disabilities and/or lived experiences that we, ourselves, don't live with. We can use [sensitivity readers](#) for pieces (or books!) that are outside our own personal experiences.

For example, as the mother of a disabled child, I can speak to being a mother of a disabled child. I cannot speak to being disabled. As a professor, I can write about teaching students with disabilities. I cannot write about HAVING disabilities, and it helps the quality (and impact) of my writing to have a sensitivity reader ensure I'm using appropriate language and examine any potential biases in my writing that I might not be aware of.

Some final quick tips

Ensure your students stay un-Google-able. (No names and no identifiable photos!) Demand that the publisher utilize appropriate language when discussing disability, illnesses, language needs, poverty, etc.

Touch base with your administration about any legal requirements related to visibility, school representation, etc.

Consider whether or not you want to use your actual name or a pen name. Privacy is of particular importance when writing at the national level. Some online readers will not be respectful of your privacy!

Happy writing! I can't wait to read all of your stories.

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Hannah Grieco is a writer, developmental editor, teacher, and disability advocate who has published her work in The Washington Post, The Week, Al Jazeera, The Independent, Huffington Post, and many more newspapers, magazines, and literary journals. She writes a monthly column about authors and books for Washington City Paper, and edits novels and prose collections for various small presses. Hannah teaches writing courses at Marymount University and through The Writer's Center. She led a [Worthy Incubator on educator writing and publishing](#) in the autumn of 2024 which is a must watch for anyone wanting to successfully publish opinion pieces in popular journals, papers and online!



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