

Near Death in the Mountains: My Path to Becoming a Better Teacher

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Vignette

In March 2014, I nearly died. I hiked up to the temple atop Mt. Omine, one of the most sacred mountains in Nara, to pray for the healthy birth of my second daughter. On my descent, I slipped and fell in the deep snow. Far from the trail, I became lost. I survived in the mountains for seven days. Miraculously, on the seventh day, I clawed my way back up to the snowy peak and found a way down to the village where my pregnant wife and 3-year-old daughter were waiting. This experience completely changed me and the trajectory of my life's path.

In my video presentation, I share the detailed story of what happened in the mountains and how that experience has transformed me into the teacher I am today. Furthermore, I describe how I incorporate the lessons that I have learned in the mountains into lessons in the classroom. I go on to illustrate how I build strong bonds with my students, and even better, motivate them by incorporating storytelling into both classroom activities and our interactions.

Objectives

- To share my story of survival and the life lessons that came from this near-death experience.
- To show how it is possible for teachers to motivate and bond with students by sharing personal narratives.
- To demonstrate how storytelling can be used both as a classroom activity and as a source of language practice.
- To inspire teachers (and others) who may sometimes feel fatigued as they navigate the peaks and valleys of academia.

Practical Implications

I am a firm believer that storytelling is a fundamental part of the human identity. Through storytelling, we form relationships and learn important life lessons. It also appears that hearing and seeing stories is a great source of entertainment. These concepts really hit home the first time I

returned to the classroom following my mountain survival experience. At first, I was a little reluctant to share my story, but after doing so I started to notice some reactions that really encouraged me to think more deeply about my experience and how I might apply it to the classroom. Over time, I have polished my story with practice and multiple retellings in several different classes. Not to mention, I found that it works really well as a source of language practice. Thus, I have also incorporated my story into a classroom activity which has increased student motivation, created a special bond between me and my students, and has become a jumping-off point for students to practice and share their own stories. The activity that I would like to share is a variation of "two truths and a lie" which I use as a getting-to-know each other activity at the beginning of the semester. Although I now teach students at a medical university who are rather proficient in English, I have also successfully used this activity in both junior high and high school classes by adjusting the level to suit their language skills. This activity could be completed in one class or spread out over several classes.

Procedure

1. Create three stories to introduce yourself to your students. Rather than a simple straightforward self-introduction, I start the first class by sharing three stories about myself with my class. However, one of the stories I share is actually not true.
2. After the students listen to the three stories, put them in pairs or small groups to discuss the three stories you have shared.
3. In their groups, ask them to come up with follow-up questions about the stories to help them better guess which story is the false one.
4. Have the students ask their follow-up questions, and share your answers with the whole class.
5. Have the students vote on which story they believe to be false.

6. Reveal to the students which story is false. This can be done in several ways. I prefer to go through the stories one by one to increase excitement and anticipation. For example, I start by saying, "Story no.1 is...true." Then I proceed to story no. 2, and finally story no.3.
7. Have the students write down their own three stories.
8. Put them back in their groups and have them share their stories with their group members.
9. (Optional) Have some students present their stories in front of the class.

Reflective Conclusion

Upon having a near-death experience, I have learned several things. First of all, I appreciate how precious life is. It may seem like something that I should have already been aware of. On the contrary, it was only when I almost lost my life that I could fully comprehend the miracle of just being alive. It is not only the feeling of having my life back but also the outpouring of love and support that I have felt from all the people around the world who were pulling for my return. The word "gratitude" comes to my mind.

Second of all, I realize that challenges are a necessary part of life and that makes life special as we meet those challenges and persevere to overcome them. Although I would not choose to repeat such an experience, it has completely changed my life in many positive ways. I feel now that challenges in life are not something to fear, but rather something to embrace.

Finally, I hope that by sharing my story I can inspire other teachers to do likewise. I strongly believe that sharing your personal narrative with your students will allow them to see you as more than just a teacher, but rather a fellow human being. In my opinion, this can break down the barrier between teacher and pupil. From my experience, this has greatly enhanced my classes and has consequently encouraged students to also open up which has created a wonderful team-like atmosphere where students are more likely to be motivated to actively participate.

Author Bio

Michael Blodgett is a full-time lecturer at Nara Medical University. He earned an MEd. in TESOL from Temple University. His research interests include motivation and authentic communication activities

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Link to Presentation on YouTube:

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SR5jNmcpJ8Q>>

