

Erin Gruwell - Autobiography

When I walked into my first class as a new teacher, I could not have been less prepared to deal with the harsh realities of the lives of my students or the way the outside world would crash into my classroom. The kids in my room lived in a racially divided community and were already hardened by firsthand exposure to gang violence, broken homes, juvenile halls, and drugs. The obstacles these teens confronted as students became challenges for me as their teacher.

The 150 freshman who drifted into Room 203 had already been dubbed as the school's "rejects." Sure enough, that hurtful judgment was reiterated several weeks later when I was told that my students were "too stupid" to read a book from cover to cover. My students were far from stupid, but they had certainly given up on education. They felt as if they had no reason to care about school; the potential rewards of college and a career seemed remote, even alien.

After hearing, "Ms. G, this doesn't have anything to do with my life," more than once, I made it my mission to prove my students wrong by finding ways to make my lessons speak to their experiences and tap into their talents.

The students brought their histories of racial conflict into the classroom. They needed an educational philosophy that promoted tolerance and encouraged them to rethink their beliefs about themselves. I decided to assign books written by, for, and about teenagers who had lived during wars but were able to right the wrong by chronicling their own harrowing stories. To my amazement, students who had originally hated reading and writing became engrossed in reading *Anne Frank*, *The Diary of a Young Girl* and Elie Wiesel's *Night*. These books and others resonated with the reality of living in a dangerous urban environment, not long after the Los Angeles riots in 1992.

When one of my students exclaimed, “I feel like I live in an undeclared war zone,” I realized that these young people needed to be encouraged to pick up a pen rather than a gun. Tragically, this student had lost two dozen friends to gang violence. In an attempt to connect with my class, I gave my students journals with the hope of giving them a voice. Before long, they began to pour out their stories openly, unburdened by the anxieties associated with spelling, grammar, and grades. Journals provided a safe place to become passionate writers communicating their own histories, their own insights. As they started to write down their thoughts and feelings, motivation blossomed. Suddenly, they had a forum for self-expression, and a place where they felt valued and validated.

As sophomores, my students were inspired to write letters to Miep Gies, the courageous woman who hid Anne Frank, and Zlata Filipovic, the teenage author who penned *Zlata's Diary: A Child's Life in Sarajevo*. When Miep Gies told my students to make sure that “Anne’s death is not in vain,” they understood her message that writing and storytelling have the power to change the world. Following in the footsteps of extraordinary teenagers like Anne and Zlata, my students used their own diaries to share their experiences of loss, hardship, and discrimination.

As juniors, I had my students watch a documentary about the Freedom Riders, the civil rights activists who rode integrated buses across the South in 1961. The courage of the Freedom Riders inspired my class to adopt the name “Freedom Writers,” reflecting the students’ determination to use their journals to speak out about the racism and intolerance that surrounded them. To celebrate their newfound identity, the Freedom Writers followed in the footsteps of the Freedom Riders and took a trip to Washington, DC. In a symbolic tribute to their namesake, they delivered a bound copy of their favorite diary entries to Richard Riley, the U.S. Secretary of Education.

As a senior class, the Freedom Writers received the Spirit of Anne Frank Award for their commitment to combating discrimination, racism, and bias-related violence. They also devoted long hours to editing their journal entries and were rewarded with a publishing contract to turn their class book into what would become a number-one-ranked *New York Times* bestseller, *The Freedom Writers Diary: How a Teacher and 150 Teens Used Writing to Change Themselves and the World Around Them* (Broadway Books, 1999). But even more meaningful to the Freedom Writers than awards or publication was the moment they collectively

walked across a graduation stage and claimed their high school diplomas, a feat few had thought possible.

After the Freedom Writers graduated from Wilson High in 1998, I made the difficult decision to trade my beloved Room 203 for California State University, Long Beach, where I became a Teacher in Residence in the College of Education. My goal was to help as many students as possible by teaching future educators. During my time at the university, some of my college students were Freedom Writers now pursuing careers in education. One of them once commented, “The best part of Ms. G’s class [at Wilson High] was how she’d start us on one of her off-the-wall activities and suddenly we were all coming up with our own ideas. It was like we were teaching the class with her. I think that’s why so many of us want to be teachers.” Hearing that, I began to dissect what truly happened in Room 203, in the hopes that my lesson plans could be replicated in other classrooms, regardless of age, academic ability, or socioeconomic level.

At the university, I discovered that some of the pedagogical strategies I had arrived at instinctively while teaching at Wilson High were supported by research in the field of education. I learned that educational psychologists strongly support a student-centered learning model based on “internal motivation.” Students who are internally motivated feel a sense of choice in the classroom, experience themselves as competent, and are more likely to achieve academic success. Teachers who support “internal motivation” listen to their students, engage interest, encourage questions, and allow their students flexibility in problem solving. Inspired by this academic validation of my student-centered methods, I drew on my classroom experiences with the Freedom Writers and began to teach future educators how to motivate their students from the inside out.

Hundreds of future teachers later, a very successful businessman challenged me to bottle my “Secret Sauce” and take my pedagogical methods to the next level. With his help, as well as crucial input from many of the original Freedom Writers, we established the Freedom Writers Foundation, a nonprofit organization devoted to replicating the success of the Freedom Writers.

Today, thanks in part to the scholarships provided by the Freedom Writers Foundation, many of the Freedom Writers have graduated from college. Some have earned their teaching credentials, while others are pursuing master's degrees and PhDs. In addition, there are Freedom Writers who contribute to the day-to-day running of the Foundation, help to organize and lead teacher-training workshops, and visit schools to empower youths to write their own stories.

Over the years, the outpouring of interest from teachers and students across the country who had read *The Freedom Writers Diary* was overwhelming. By holding a mirror to their lives, the Freedom Writers were able to touch on universal truths, illuminate the lives of teenagers, and provide hope for the future.

The next step for the Foundation was to pilot our training methodology – “The Freedom Writers Method” -- with a group of teachers who became affectionately known as the “Freedom Writer Teachers.” These dynamic individuals were among the first educators to go through the Freedom Writers Institute in Long Beach, California. They came from urban, rural, and suburban regions of the United States and Canada, and their classrooms reflect a range of socioeconomic and academic levels. The Freedom Writer Teachers have a breadth of experience that includes working with at-risk students, honors students, English Language Learners, and incarcerated youth, ranging from middle school to high school. The Freedom Writer Teachers taught *The Freedom Writers Diary* in their classrooms and tested our activities with their own students. They also played an integral role in helping us create our first teachers guide by contributing ideas and suggestions, sharing their students' reactions to the activities, and passing along their own comments, which can be found in the “Teacher Talk” section of the Guide.

The Freedom Writers Diary: Teacher's Guide offers a standards-based curriculum that combines innovative teaching methods with an easy-to-use compilation of lesson plans that serve a variety of student needs and classroom settings. The activities featured in the guide changed my students' attitudes toward learning and improved their academic achievement. Apathetic students developed into critical thinkers and socially aware citizens. Other benefits included significantly reduced truancy rates, fewer behavioral problems, improved reading retention, and higher test scores. I believe these outcomes are possible in any classroom.

The Freedom Writers Institute and our resource material such as the Teacher's Guide were created for dedicated teachers who wish to revitalize their classrooms by using meaningful lessons infused with a real world context. Teaching the Freedom Writers Method will help inspire students to write about their own journeys, give them the confidence to reach their full academic potential, and encourage them to improve their community through the message of tolerance. My hope is that all students can learn from our unique story and pick up a pen and write what needs to be written.

May you teach one to teach another...

-Erin Gruwell