

28 word **biographies**

by Kurt Wootton



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An Habla Original Practice

This practice was piloted at the Visible Rights conference in Sao Paulo, Brazil, in November, 2008. It is now a key activity used both in Habla partner schools in Brazil and Mexico as well as several school districts in the United States.

We had a long layover in Houston, Texas, so we rented a car and drove to the nearest Borders. There we began browsing through books in the “short fiction” section looking for works of literature perfectly suited for use in a language classroom. We searched through a range of books with titles like *Flash Fiction: 72 Very Short Stories* and *Micro Fiction: An Anthology of Really Short Stories*. These titles sounded a bit contrived, but when I opened the book to look at the list of authors--Raymond Carver, Joyce Carol Oats, Margaret Atwood, Sam Shepard--I knew these short works had possibility.

Then, I found a book called *Six Sentences* in which authors write a story, in yes, only six sentences. This reminded me of a workshop I had participated in led by Chicago teaching artist Cynthia Weiss in which we looked at a photograph and had to write a response to the photograph with only 24 words. As the workshop progressed she asked us to parse our writing down to 12 and then only 6 words.

In a recent workshop in Santa Monica, California, we were working with a beautiful children’s book about Frida Kahlo called *Frida* by Jonah Winter and Ana Juan. The inside of the cover reads:

Magdalena Frida Kahlo was born in Mexico in 1901. This is the story of how she learned to paint, how painting saved her life, and why her paintings are like no one else’s. Like Frida’s art, it is a work of the imagination, but it is also true.

Marimar and I loved the idea of this brief description of Frida’s life. Marimar spoke with the teachers about how a biography is a particular interpretation of a person’s life. Indeed, the Frida children’s book includes her painting and her health issues, but completely leaves out her tumultuous, passionate relationship with Diego.

What developed was the idea of “notecard autobiographies.” With only a notecard, participants write an introduction to a book about



themselves. They began with the form of the book flap from *Frida*, “Jim Smith was born in Omaha in 1956. This is the story of how . . .”

With all of these influences, we began to conceive of a way to write biography with our students. It’s difficult to write about yourself, so we decided to combine interviews and biography writing. We also loved Cynthia’s idea of paring down text, finding the essential words. We ended up synthesizing all of these ideas into the *28 word autobiography*.

In order to develop literacy in the classroom it is critical, as Paulo Freire writes in *Pedagogy of Hope*, to foster a mutual relationship between

a “reading of the world and a reading of the word. Not a reading of the word alone, nor a reading of the world, but both together, in dialectical solidarity.” When we interview each other, we hear about another person’s world, the life they lead beyond our day-to-day interaction with them. Writing a biography is a significant responsibility that requires us to search for the words to honor the person we are writing about. To add to the challenge, we have only 28 words to select and form in a way that will do our subject justice.

Yet although it is a challenge, we find it is much easier than writing a 28 word autobiography of ourselves. The biography is a medium

that is about the other and therefore an easier starting point than autobiography. In addition to developing literacy, biography writing also cements the classroom community in way nothing else can; we tell and listen to the personal stories of those around us.

We have used this activity in many groups of people from language learners to educational leaders. In all groups during the interview process, we ask for the participants to push beyond the obvious to the stories lying “between the cracks,” and this has made all the difference in generating biographies that crackle with energy versus those that tell us all that we already know.

Procedure

1. Introduction. Offer an overview of the process, particularly emphasizing the participants in the room will be writing a biography honoring another person. If the participants know each other well explain that we are looking for the stories that are “between the cracks,” by asking questions that get below the surface. If biography models are available from past participants, share them with the class at the beginning of the process so they will have a sense of where they are headed.

2. Questions. Participants will individually take time to develop a list of questions they *might* ask in the interview. Explain that good interviews often take strange and different directions from what the interviewer is planning. As stories emerge, you as the interviewer want to ask for more information, more details, letting the story develop



rather than moving through a fixed list of questions. The questions are often a starting point and provide a back-up in case the interview doesn’t develop its own energy.

3. Interviews. Place participants in pairs to take turns interviewing each other. Each interview will last at least 10 minutes. The interviewer will be the “most attentive listener in the world” to use artist educator Jan Mandell’s phrase. The interviewer will take notes, capturing exactly some of the key phrases, words and sentences of the person they are interviewing (these will be necessary for writing the 28 word biography later). It will be impossible to capture everything so the interviewer needs to listen carefully, distilling the important information, and taking notes based on what he/she needs.

4. Biography writing. When the participants return from their interviews, they will have

a set of notes based on their interviews. Explain they will now write a 28 word biography—no more, no less—honoring their partner. The biographies can be abstract, poetic, or narrative. Read a range of different past examples as models. If people are having trouble getting started, explain they can use the exact words from the interview notes, arranging them in different ways.

5. Essential words. After the participants finish, working with the exact same words, explain they will distill the biographies down to 14 words, no more, no less.

6. 7 word biographies. Finally ask participants to distill the 14 word biography down to exactly 7 words, adding no new words.

7. Reading in pairs. Place participants again with their partners. With their partners, they will read the 28, 14, and 7 word biographies.



Extending the Biography

The following ideas are possibilities for building on the activity incorporating other artistic mediums.

- **Biography Performances.** Place participants in groups of four or five, ask them to share biographies with each other, choose one, and bring it to performance honoring the original intent and tone of the writing.
- **Physical Sculptures.** Place the participants in a circle around the room sitting on the floor. A volunteer will take several participants from the circle and form them into a physical sculpture representing the biography. Once the sculpture is formed, the sculptor will read the biography next to the frozen sculpture (for a more thorough description see the *Physical Sculptures* activity).
- **Tagging Texts.** Each participant will take the 7 word biography and “tag” it on the wall of the school (see the *Tagging Text* activity).



Habla is an educational center and lab school based in Mérida, Yucatán, México, dedicated to fostering school environments that promote the success of all students from multiple cultural backgrounds. For teachers, artists, and school leaders, Habla offers: cultural and language experiences, teacher institutes, and an annual international educational forum.

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