

# Chismógrafos

*by Kurt Wootton*



# Chismógrafos



## An Habla Original Activity

This activity was developed by María del Mar Patrón Vázquez, Amy Lehrburger, and Kurt Wootton as a way of teaching literacy and language. It is now a key activity used in Habla language classrooms with students of all ages.

We find ideas for best practices in the most unexpected places. One afternoon, our Habla team of teachers was sitting around the table thinking of possible ways to inspire our teenagers to write in our English classes. We knew we wanted the teenagers to generate stories in narrative form, but if you teach middle school or high school students you know it's difficult to motivate thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen year olds to simply write stories about their lives!

Since we do place a great value on storytelling at Habla, we needed to find a way to inspire the teenagers to write stories. María del Mar, one of the co-directors of Habla, said, "When I was in high school we used to have these notebooks, called chismógrafos. We wrote a question on each page, and then passed the notebook around to different grades and even different schools. All the other students wrote their answers to the questions." The word chismógrafo combines the Spanish word *chisme* which means gossip with the Greek suffix *graphia* which means a style of writing. This type of casual and unrestrained writing

was key for getting our class of teenage girls to open up by answering fun questions they were interested in. I asked a group of our Mexican teachers what kind of questions they used to write about in their own chismógrafos years ago and they shared questions like, "Which boy/girl do you like?" "What is your favorite movie?" "Who is your favorite singer?" "Who was the first person you kissed?" "What is your favorite book?"

We liked the idea of the chismógrafo but the questions that are typically asked lacked the potential of developing stories in response. So we took the concept of chismógrafos and fused it with the art of bookmaking we learned from visiting artist Amanda Lichtenstein of BreakArts.

The students made their own books with a sheet of construction paper. As a title for their mini-book, they each thought of an ending to the line "Tell me a story about . . ." that they wrote on the cover page. Students passed the books around, sent them to other classes in the school, and the books filled with stories.



We adapted the process for our language classrooms by adding an extra step for revision of the students' narratives. Before students write in a classmate's book, they write a draft of their story in their own notebooks. A native speaker edits the original text with the student before each draft was "published" in a chismógrafo. This natural process led to conversations about vocabulary and grammar that were authentic and embedded in the need to tell the story.

When we introduced the activity in the classroom, students feverishly wrote their own stories and scrambled to read each other's

responses to prompts they had generated including:

Tell me a story about your funniest experience.

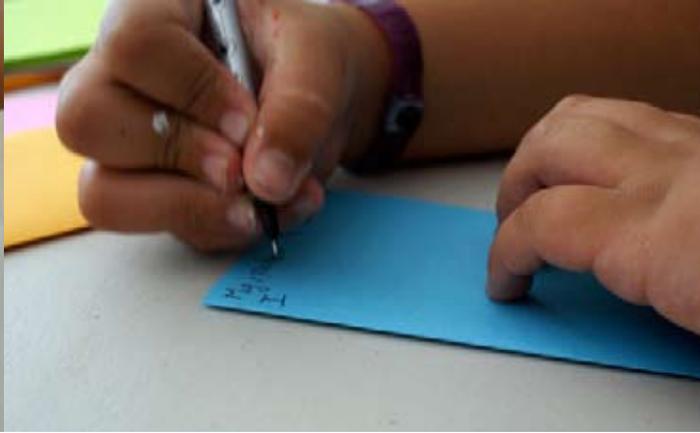
Tell me a story about the best thing you have done with your friends

Tell me a story about the best party that you ever went to.

Tell me a story about the worst experience of your entire life.

Tell me a story about the happiest moment in your life.

Tell me a story about the last time you were afraid.



## Procedure

**1. Select the story.** Students will create their own books during the class. Before you start, ask students to brainstorm possible prompts for their books beginning with the phrase, "Tell me a story about..." Offer them some examples. Ask them to invent an original prompt to be the focus of their book. Encourage them to choose a prompt that they would like to respond to with their own story. Check to make sure all the topics are both generative and appropriate.

**2. Make the book.** There are many simple book structures that can be made with one or two pieces of construction paper. Choose a structure with no fewer than 6 pages and ask the students to create a simple book using colored paper. We opted for a simple structure in which students fold one sheet into eight quadrants, resulting in 6 inside pages

and a front and a back. There are many instructions for bookmaking available on-line with videos and photo explanations.

**3. Design the cover.** The students artfully create a cover page for their books, writing their "Tell me a story about..." titles and decorating the empty space. The title needs to be clear enough so that other students, when they receive the book, will understand the prompt and be able to tell their stories. At Habla we provided the class with colored permanent markers to write their title and design their covers with borders and illustrations.

**4. Write and edit.** Students first write their own stories in their own books. After reflecting on the narratives they want to share, they write the first draft of their story on a separate piece of paper. Each draft is reviewed for grammar and spelling. These mini-conferences



between student and teacher might also be used to have larger conversations about how to write an effective story. Nancie Atwell's book *In the Middle* is an excellent resource for how to structure writing conferences. In Habla's classrooms, since our students are learning a language, we confer with students quickly and work with them on how to correct grammar mistakes and misspelled words. Students are motivated to "get it right" because they know their peers will be reading their work in the final books.

**5. Publish.** When each draft is approved, students then "publish" the work in the chismógrafo. Using a variety of pens and markers, students write and illustrate their stories.

**6. Pass, read and share.** After students publish their stories, they pass their books along to other students. Repeat the writing, editing, and publishing process in a relaxed atmosphere. When the books begin to fill up, students will be eager to read the new chapters. Let students talk about their stories, ask questions, and guess who the authors are.

In the tradition of the chismógrafo, the books can be passed beyond the classroom, from class to class, or even school to school. Language and literacy learning is about the sharing of stories, finding the words to describe ourselves and the world around us. The chismógrafo, borrowed from popular Mexican youth culture, places writing and language learning in the hands of the students.



**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.

***[www.habla.org](http://www.habla.org)***