

Private Eye Polly Fillers – assisting students who seek to write personal stories

Victoria Neumark-Jones, London Metropolitan University

When we think of untold stories, we often focus on those from ethnic minorities, socially and economically disadvantaged groups, people with less common sexual orientations or gender definitions and so forth, as explored by such as Hall, Bourdieu, Chomsky, Hoggart, Kristeva, Butler et al.

London Metropolitan University claims to be the HEI with the largest proportion of students from ethnic minorities and social disadvantaged groups. Many of our students are burning to tell their stories. How far is it our duty to assist them?

This paper is by way of a cautionary note. I will explore four case studies from our own student body to highlight some ethical dilemmas in teaching students how to mine their own difficulties for good copy.

Whilst some hacks enjoy acting as Private Eye Polly Fillers or Sarah Vains, this may be a perilous path for young people who have scarcely managed their way out of difficult situations which may offer important insights into how society works, but also throw the spotlight on them.

The four case studies concern the areas of crime, child protection, health and sexuality. Legal considerations aside, focusing on the duty of care which educators owe to their students, even those who are legally adults, is one useful guideline. There is also the question of modelling ethical journalistic practice.

If a writer is also involved in an article which reveals personal details, how far should they afford themselves the consideration which we are teaching them to extend to vulnerable subjects?

Health

My first case study is about **health**. One of our students, let's call her A, was keen to explore her contention that eczema, from which she suffered, tips with the use of steroid creams from becoming an auto-immune disorder to becoming one of addiction to medication, resulting in "red skin syndrome" or Red Lobster. This would be the subject of her final year projection – a 6,000 word piece of journalism backed up by essay and literature review. She had previously written frankly on social media about her sexual proclivities – and had had some trolling as a result. She shrugged this off, but we were concerned that she might incur much more unwarranted attention if she used her own experience as the lynch pin for her final-year project.

We worked with her to shift the focus of her project from a personal piece to a survey of this condition, using experts, other sufferers, databases and so on. We pushed her towards a writing style which could incorporate her own sassiness and personality, but not reveal too much of a difficult personal struggle. Especially as we encourage our granduands to publish their stories on blogs and social media.

Here is what changed

The first draft of the project plan:

Skin. Everyone has it. Including you. Now imagine your skin has been replaced. Substituted for a red sleeve rapidly spreading its way across your whole body. You're constantly in pain but there's nothing you can do but let it surpass. It's not really you but you can't hide it. I know what it is like and I want to tell you how to

.....

The beginning of the final project:

Eczema is one of the most common skin conditions in the world, affecting up to 20% of children and 1-3% of

adults worldwide. Itchy, red, dry and cracked skin, eczema, also known as dermatitis, can be a pretty shitty ride for a lot of individuals. But what happens when the eczema becomes more than just an itch? What if it ends up taking over your life?

A billion-pound business, the steroid industry is an incredibly trendy one to say the least. Have a small patch of eczema on your leg? Rub in some steroid cream and see your skin heal within a matter of days. But just how beneficial is this quick-fix? And who's to say the eczema won't return... for the worse?

But we weren't able to impose our boring old middle-aged ideas of journalistic impartiality on her entirely.....as her ending shows

SO WHAT NEXT?

Despite Aron's comments, us at COSMO are whole heartedly convinced Topical Steroid Addiction exists. However, proving this to an entire generation is physically impossible without your help. You've read the stories, you've seen the pictures and you've seen the improvement – without withdrawing these girls would still be suffering.

Without spreading the word, those will continue to suffer and will continue to be prescribed more corticosteroids by dermatologists unknowing to the dangers they potentially cause.

If you believe you or a loved one is suffering from Topical Steroid Addiction, please visit ITSAN for more advice.

Love from a TSW survivor xo

You can perhaps see why our marker commented:

For the future, try leaving out "I" and "me" - the narrative reads better if the narrator is invisible.

Learning point: Help students transform personal accounts into general ones

Child protection/safeguarding

Some students give you a funny feeling. My experience over the last couple of years is that one should heed those feelings. We'll call this student B. I have changed quite a few details of this case.

B was a lively, pretty girl who very early in her first year had a great many stories to tell about herself – that she had turned down a scholarship to a dance college, that she lived with her grandmother, that she had travelled widely. The details available to me showed that she had only just turned 18 – and therefore her fees were paid for as a further education student. At class in week 6, she turned up in tears, saying she had been assaulted by an intruder in her flat and had spent the night walking the streets. The other students rallied around her, and she decided to remain in class. She had meetings with Victim Support.

Quite soon after this, we had a class discussion about family and she volunteered that “you can't always trust your mother” – an assertion which horrified the others in class.

Later we had a writing exercise about the account about a Yazidi girl who had been abducted in Iraq, her family murdered. She had managed to escape rape and had fled with the help of cousins. B objected to this material, saying that one couldn't ask people who had been raped to report on rape. Stupidly, I treated this as an academic objection and pointed out that journalists have to cover all manner of awful things. She complied with the task, but with hindsight, I think I lost her trust at this point. Fast-forward to a couple of months later, when her attendance had become erratic and I suddenly get an email

I'm just messaging to you let you know that I was

assaulted on Friday by a student at London metropolitan university on my way home.

I'm horrified. I've spent most of my weekend in hospital. I've been in so much pain. I have reported him to the police but in regards to safety at the university I just don't know.

I have spoken to Neil from the care leavers team, I have made him aware and he's contacted student services to see how this can proceed. I did also make Wendy aware. I don't want him anywhere near me.

I would like to come to the event, I'm trying to get a friend to escort me there. I'm so shaken up! Just horrified!

Obviously, I was also horrified. This was the first notification I had that B had been in care. I tried to find out what had happened. In brief, B accused a fellow student of having assaulted her on the tube. The matter was left with the transport police, who were very assiduous in urging us to exclude the other student. Yet, because I knew the other student, a slight young man who was also gay, I was doubtful from the first. In private, a colleague and I asked him what had happened and his account was completely at variance to hers, as was that of a third student who had been on a very crowded train. He showed us texts they had exchanged, which were friendly over the time that she said she had been in hospital.

Matters came to a head when B turned up to class and demanded that he be excluded as he made her feel unsafe (they were sitting at opposite ends of the room). I had to explain that nothing had been proved against him and that we could not be judge and jury and privilege her account over his. She demanded to see the team in private in the break and aggressively demanded "would you treat your own daughter like this?" I pointed out that he had not even looked at her during class, much less said or done anything to make her unsafe. She got campus security to come in and remove her stuff.

Anyone like to guess what had happened and how we found out? In brief, there is closed circuit TV on all tube trains. The footage bore out his version, not hers. She had not been in hospital that weekend. However, I found out that there were various legal order in force on this young women, relating to her safety, gang members and trafficking..

Had we simply acted on B's story, the young man could have been lost his student status and been deported.

I took three learning points from this.

- 1) Be more careful about students' objections to material. Never mind if "in the real world" journalists cover such material willy-nilly. As educators, we have a duty of care which overrides this.**
- 2) Be neutral with any allegations which involve outside agencies. You have to protect the accused as well as the accuser.**
- 3) Be aware that you never know your students' back story. It may be extreme.**

Sexuality

"Slut or no slut, I don't deserve to be raped" proclaimed student C's project plan. Sadly, this is not an uncommon experience for our young female students. In her case, we worked hard to uphold her anger and protect her vulnerability. Her final project was entitled "The word that hurts us all" and drew on a variety of interviews, from victims, to lawyers to police and spokespeople for charities. She has got a good job in the media and has written to thank us for helping her develop professional skills.

Last term, however, I was approached by student D. D is from Africa and is living far from the university with family members who are very censorious of her actions. She was raped by a man whom she trusted, who dragged her into the bushes in daylight. She came to me because she had been missing classes, was late to classes and behind with her work, having missed deadlines. I had emailed her a few times asking to know what was going on. She couldn't concentrate. Her story emerged haltingly, with many tears. She had, of course, washed immediately, so had not had physical evidence; she had taken a week to approach a Sexual Health Clinic; she had taken a month to approach student counselling and at the time of the meeting, had not yet told her relatives with whom she lived. Ridiculously, what I was able to do for her was help her fill in a mitigating circumstances form. Of course, I was also telling her that she was not, as she felt, dirty and sullied, that her family must support her (I am not so sure about this, by the way, judging from a couple of other similar stories) and that she must go however belatedly to the police. She didn't do this. She is, however, still working on her assessments at the time of writing.

Learning point: Always try and find the real reason for student absence

Crime

I've had two student tackle knife crime in successful media projects. Both had had terrible experiences. One – let's call her student E – had lost a brother to it. The other – let's call him F – had seen his best friend

stabbed to death. He ran away from his chaotic home and lived hand to mouth for years before coming to university.

Both were consumed by the desire to transform their own horror into something positive. F sat with me for many hours, talking about who to interview and how to create a podcast that would hit home. His final piece, which linked politicians, community leaders, street youth, an ex-policeman and a support group which connected the mothers of victims with the mothers of murderers, made me cry.

E is a single mother who strung her amazing footage of police brutality, of drill music and talking heads, of statistics and analysis, on the thread of what could she tell her nine-year old son. She has also spent time weeping in my office.

In both these cases, I can say that creating a journalistic product was able to help students frame and gain control of their adverse experiences. There is no cure for these awful events, but individuals can gain some purchase on their reactions. That can be helped by simply saying: “It might work better if you had an expert here”; or “If you cut down the crying, you might let the audience cry.”

E had a job at the BBC, F went on to do a Master’s in documentary film.

Learning point: Trust students to know what they need to say: protect them by giving them professional skills.