

THE STORY OF BELMONT HILL: CREATING AN ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVE
WITH GRADE 12 BOYS

David Hegarty

Belmont Hill School, Belmont, Massachusetts, USA

Abstract

This action research project was undertaken with Grade 12 boys in one section of a non-fiction writing course to create an oral history archive recording their "Story of Belmont Hill." The course met four times per week and I attended most of these meetings. Most weeks, the students had a new writing prompt; some examples including "Where do you really live?" and "Describe a moment of mischief." In addition to these writing prompts, we also read Stephen King's *On Writing* and excerpts from other writers, including David Sedaris and Frank McCourt. Eventually, the writing prompt for the boys was to tell their "Story of Belmont Hill," and they wrote a four to six page essay on how they saw their story of Belmont Hill develop over their time at school. This story served as a precursor to their oral history interview. In their essays and interviews, the boys identified four major themes: Appreciation for Peers; Relational Learning; Importance of Teamwork; and Traditions. All of the boys will leave school with strong bonds with their teachers and peers; one boy explained that, "besides teachers, the brotherhood of friends at Belmont Hill is the strongest." Additionally, the students also chose examples to share in class of good story telling from clips of TED Talks, noted American oral historian, Studs Terkel, and *Storycorps* interviews. The teacher of the course enjoyed this project and will be using it again next year.

Introduction

The boys of Belmont Hill have various opportunities to tell their story, be it in *The Bell*, our Middle School newspaper, or *The Panel*, our Upper School newspaper. During their senior year, our Grade 12 boys are required to contribute a page for *The Sundial*, our school yearbook. Additionally, the seniors are also required to make a panel carving from wood before

graduation. Besides my duties as the Library Director, I am also a History teacher. One of the courses I teach is our Grade 9 History elective in which we study the Middle East, China, South Africa, and India. For all of these regions of the world, I try to incorporate some fiction into the course, as all of these regions have rich story telling traditions that help boys to understand complex historical facts and concepts. For several years, I have also served as the faculty advisor for our school newspaper and yearbook, and so see the boys' stories develop over time

During the Spring 2017 semester, I taught a senior elective on the history of the school and the connections between one of our founding families and their ownership of a sugar plantation in nineteenth century Cuba. One of the first assignments in the class was to read the first chapter of the school history called *The Story of Belmont Hill*. Upon reading this chapter, the students were tasked with writing their Story of Belmont Hill, reflecting upon the ups and downs of their time and life at school. Dr. Michael Thompson, author of *Raising Cain*, and a noted speaker at boys' schools around the world was on the faculty of Belmont Hill for many years; he often spoke to the faculty about the importance of hearing boys' voices. Obviously, hearing those voices can occur in the classroom, on a theatre stage, or on a field. In thinking about my action research question, "How might creating an oral history archive deepen Grade 12 boys' understanding of shared experiences on their school journey?" this oral history archive seemed like a logical next step for the boys to document their stories.

Literature Review

Reichert and Hawley (2010) have written extensively about the importance that boys place on relational learning and how they have found the "relational domain to be an important predictor of quality teaching and student learning" (p.xxiii). Whether it is the informal setting of a campfire, during a class, on a bus to an athletic contest, or during an oral history interview, Belmont Hill boys like to listen to and hear, stories about their peers, friends, teachers, and their day-to-day of life at school in the past, present, and beyond. One of the findings of Reichert and Hawley's (2013) research on boys' schools was that, "despite our injunction against naming names, many respondents ignored this and proceeded, often with touching emotion, to relate stories of particular teachers" (p.37). Our Grade 12 class spent a night off campus at the beginning of the new school year at a local camp. The advisers of the students were also

present, several of whom were teachers of the seniors, and also, alums of the school. Steve Kaplan (personal communication, 2018), one of these alum teachers noted, over a campfire that night, that "sharing these personal stories allows current students to relate, connect and hopefully be inspired to form their own strong bonds that will serve them so well many years into future."

The telling of stories goes back millennia and is important in many cultures for passing on values and customs (Jirata & Simonsen, 2014; Polletta & Motes 2011). Almost every library in the world has some kind of story-time for children and parents. In fact, as children listen to stories, "they unconsciously become familiar with the rhythms, and the structure, the cadences, and conventions of the various forms of written language (Greene & Del Negro, 2010, p. xii). Likewise, there are now options for hearing stories online from organizations such as *Storycorps*, whose mission, Freund (2015) notes, is to "preserve and share humanity's stories in order to build connections between people and create a more just and compassionate world" (p.104). For audiences, young and old, as Keding (2010) notes in *The United States of Storytelling*, "stories are windows that allow us a glimpse of another time. We can see how people differed from us and how they were similar to us, how they acted under severe hardship and how they lived their daily lives" (p. xiii). Haven (2007) "reviewed over 350 research studies from 15 separate fields of science. Every one of those studies agrees that stories are an effective and efficient vehicle for teaching, for motivating, and for the general communication of factual information, concepts, and tacit information" (p.4).

The connections between oral storytelling, oral history, and the importance of voice in stories have been noted by many scholars, including Howes (2014), in his book *Storytelling in the Moment*. Howes notes that "the human voice is probably the most sublimely subtle auditory instrument for adding sense and sensibility to the spoken word" (p.105). In their seminal work, *Oral History and Digital Humanities*, Boyd and Larson (2014), speak to the principles and best practices of an oral history archive from "preservation to access and curation, discovery and discourse" (p.13). One of the case studies profiled by Boyd and Larson (2014) is the Japanese American Legacy Oral History Project, "named *Densho*, a Japanese term meaning to pass stories to the next generation" (p.103). This project was inspired by the work of the Shoah Foundation

in its efforts to have voices heard and stories remembered by those who survived the horrors of the holocaust (p.133).

Sheftel (2013) has identified that "oral historians have traditionally sought meaning in the narrative accounts recorded during the interview and in the context of the interview itself" (p.xvii). This speaks to the hope that "thinking of one's life as a story, as something that can be narrated, involves social processes and conventions operative well beyond individual processes of reflection or experience" (p.49). In their collection of oral histories of the American past, Armitage and Mercier (2016), emphasize hearing the voices of "ordinary people," (p.3) in exploring issues in American history ranging from child labor, to migration, to the Cold War. For these two scholars, oral history is "much more than a conversation between two people about past events. Oral history refers to a planned and recorded interview in which the interviewer helps the narrator recall certain experiences in full detail. For the narrator, the process of reflecting often elicits spontaneous thoughts and emotions, bringing a sense of immediacy that even the best-written recollections lack" (p.2). During our interview, one boy was able to see how he went from a "shy Grade 7 boy to someone who's ready to kind of tackle the world."

For another Grade 12 boy at the camp, "the fire was a time for kids in our grade to tell funny stories about the past and gave kids who usually don't talk often the chance to do so in front of all of their classmates. Listening to stories and laughing along to them with my classmates was a lot of fun." Kindlon and Thompson (1999) have written about how "boys will be open about their feelings if you create a safe environment for it" (p.20). Frick (1986) found that "not only can specific learning skills be attained through story reading or telling, but additional knowledge can also be acquired from the material or through personal anecdotes from the teacher's own experience" (p.301).

Research Context

Belmont Hill School is located just outside Boston, Massachusetts. The school has 450 students in Grades 7 to 12, with approximately 30 boys boarding at school. Parts of the school's mission statement speaks to the educating of "boys in mind, body, and spirit to develop men of good character," while cultivating "critical thinking and creativity, teamwork and competition, hard

work and reflection, tradition and innovation." Furthermore, the "school strives to instill in each boy ethical judgment, a sense of common humanity, and a lifelong love of learning." Since the school's founding in 1923, Belmont Hill has prided itself on being an institution with a highly rigorous academic profile, while also maintaining excellence in athletics and the arts. In his opening remarks to the school in August 2018, our new Headmaster, Greg Schneider, said "whether you are a returning student, a new Belmont Hill boy, or a member of our amazing faculty and staff, it is such an honour to welcome all of you to our next chapter in the Belmont Hill story."

The Action

Participants in this study were twelve Grade 12 students in my mentor's Non-Fiction writing class. Permission was received from the students and their parents to take part in the research, for the use of pictures, writings, and audio and video interviews. Student names were excluded from my data collection and reporting to ensure anonymity.

Besides the reflection essay, there were a number of other essays, including one with the prompt, "Where do you really live?" One boy in the class, a day student, wrote in his essay that "a true home provides inhabitants with a roof, a safe haven, and a sense of purpose. Although as unorthodox as it may be, Belmont Hill in its rawest form, is my home." It was interesting to observe the thoughtfulness in this boy's voice as he read this essay aloud to the class, and to also observe the nodding of heads from the other boys in the class too.

Leading up to the writing of their "Story of Belmont Hill" essay, the boys read excerpts from the biographical writings of several writers including David Sedaris, Stephen King, and Frank McCourt. Upon completion of the essays, the boys read them out loud to the class. Similarly, prior to the one on one interview with me, we listened as a class to examples of good oral history interviews from noted American oral historian, Studs Terkel. Additionally, we also listened to examples from *Storycorps*, whose mission is "preserve and share humanity's stories in order to build connections between people and create a more just and compassionate world." The boys were particularly moved by a TED Talk from Dave Isay, founder of *Storycorps*, titled "Every one around you has a story the world needs to hear." Over the Thanksgiving holiday, a time

when many American families gather together, the boys were tasked with creating their own *Storycorps* interview with a family member or loved one. In early December, after the Thanksgiving holiday, the boys sat down with me for their one-on-one oral history interview.

Data Collection

This action research was based on the model developed by Mertler (2017). I had a group of 12 boys who participated in the research. Mertler (2017) notes the importance of a “persistent and prolonged participation” (p.142) with one’s interviewees and how, “the length of time you spend observing, interviewing, and participating in the site is critical in research using qualitative data” (p.142). My daily presence in the class definitely helped enhance my rapport and relationship with the boys.

As suggested by Mertler (2017), I used qualitative techniques such as “observations and interviews” (p.128) along with essay samples from the boys. I analyzed the essays for themes related to their Belmont Hill story. Additionally, I had a Google doc open during class to record my observations and capture some of the formal conversations pertaining to the readings, but also, some of the informal “banter” between the boys before, during, and after class. One of the assignments involved the boys writing a reflection essay on their “Story of Belmont Hill.” The boys then expanded on their reflection essay during an oral history interview with me in which they talked about their time at Belmont Hill.

My quantitative data collection involved the boys filling out a Google survey form, in which they both rated and answered in an open-ended narrative form, their experiences with and perspectives on aspects of Belmont Hill life, including the following:

- Advising
- Arts
- Athletics
- Community Service
- Extracurricular Activities
- Friendships
- Teachers
- Traditions at the school

My observations followed the Mertler (2017) model of being both “unstructured and semi structured” (p.131) during my time in class. One example of the unstructured nature of the observations was what one of the boys referred to as the occasional “banter” that occurs before and after class; conversations and stories captured about yesterday’s game, the upcoming test in Math, or writing that last college essay. I would capture these conversations in my notes from each class. Similarly, the oral history interviews also followed this model, but the overarching goal of hearing the boys’ voices on their Belmont Hill story was achieved, with some occasional guidance and instruction from me. Thus, I kept the interviews open ended in scope with “only a few questions, very broad in nature” (Mertler, p.134).

From the pre-questionnaire to the two-page reflective essay to the oral history interview, I used the categories of opened-ended questions, beginning each question with either “What, Why or Which?” (p.134), as suggested by Mertler (2017). This allowed the boys to think about how Academics, Athletics, and Friendships, etc. have framed some of their Belmont Hill story and how it has evolved over their time at school. I used a Sony Stereo Digital Voice Recorder to record the oral history interview, and the Trint App for audio transcriptions of the interviews.

Data Analysis

After the transcribing of the interviews was completed, I used color coded highlighters to determine which factors, from Academics, Athletics, and Friendships, had most played a role in their Belmont Hill story. Additionally, some themes from the Yearbook page and wood-carving panel were also analyzed as a way to gather how those two opportunities were used to summarize their Story of Belmont Hill. Many of the boys acknowledged the role of teachers, parents, and their peers in their Belmont Hill experience, using both text, images, and photographs.

Discussion of Findings

Through data analysis, four major themes were identified:

Appreciation for Peers

It was clear that for all 12 boys, they will be leaving school with a core group of friends and friendships that will last long after their time at school. This includes relationships with their peers and their teachers. In his questionnaire, one boy explained that, "besides teachers, the brotherhood of friends at Belmont Hill is the strongest. I think I have a great diversity of friends in terms of personalities. While I mainly have two completely different friend groups, I think I have a lot of somewhat friends and get along with just about everybody." Boy G noted that, "going to an all-boys school, that brotherhood is automatically forged." Several boys noted the various tiers of friendships, but it seemed that within the 75 members of Grade 12, there were few, if any, cliques of friends who exclude others. Nine of the 12 boys rated their quality of friendships as being a 10 out of 10. Boy I, in his interview, felt that as a Grade 10 student "playing a varsity sport helped befriend the older students." Boy I titled his essay *A Balancing Act*, and this was very much reflective of the experience of many of the boys as they sought to balance the demands of academics, athletics, and hanging out with friends. Several of the boys mentioned that once the all-important driver's permit or license was obtained, the connections with friends expanded as they had more flexibility with getting together with friends on nights and weekends, without having to rely on parents or older siblings. As with academics, for some of the boys, the friendship piece of their Belmont Hill story was also fraught with some bumps along the way. Boy L noted that in his first year at the school, he had "a bit of trouble with friends. I think I wasn't really used to the whole chirping environment and stuff." Interestingly for me, throughout the semester of being in the non-fiction class, I noticed regular bouts of "chirping," in and out of class, almost always good-natured in tone and actions. Boy H noted in his survey that "the thing that sets Belmont Hill apart from any other school is the people. Whether it is the students or the teachers, everyone on campus wants the best for everyone else, and is willing to do whatever it takes to help each other. It is this collective bond amongst the school community that will stick with me for the rest of my life."

Relational Learning

Five out of the 12 boys rated the impact of teachers on their school experience as being a 10 out of 10. As one boy noted in his survey, "the teachers have had an unquantifiable impact on me over my six years." While Belmont Hill is a day school, with a small boarding population, the

school has always embraced the boarding school model of teachers also coaching, advising, and serving as advisors for extra-curricular activities. Boy G, in his interview, was genuinely in awe of a long time English teacher, with his "endless notes on books and Macbeth and Shakespeare. It's just years of dedication and I really appreciated seeing how dedicated he was to teaching and coaching." Another boy spoke about a math teacher who "spent hours preparing for every class even after decades of teaching. That is true dedication." There are two teachers for whom the 2018-2019 school year is their 47th year of teaching at Belmont Hill. Two of the 12 boys even talked about becoming teachers themselves someday, and Boy J would "hope to come back to Belmont Hill at some point to give back. I always had the dream of making it big early and coming back as a teacher. I just so love the environment here. Boy E spoke for many of the boys when he noted in his interview that the teachers "have their student's back in and out of the classroom, which leads to more engaged students that want to do well not only for themselves, but for their teachers as well."

Importance of Teamwork

Many of the boys mentioned that it is through their sports teams that they have gained the most long lasting friendships at school, but, as in the classroom, the athletic realm was also where they learned how to persevere, work together, and adapt through some of the academic and athletic challenges they faced as part of their Belmont Hill story. As a school with a long athletic tradition, it was not surprising to see that 10 of the 12 boys ranked their appreciation of athletics as either a nine or 10, on the 10-point scale. Sport is such an integral part of their day, and also, a large part of how they see themselves as Belmont Hill boys, during their time at school, but also, for many years beyond. Many of the boys had the experience of playing for at least one varsity sport, and it was clear that the time, commitment, and dedication given to this sport during the season, and in some cases, year round, was a defining part of their Belmont Hill story. Speaking for many boys who come to the school with very high expectations and perceptions of themselves, one boy noted, "I've had a great experience on every team I've been on at Belmont Hill. I wouldn't say I expected to be some sort of stud of an athlete but I was blown away at the level of competition when I reached the school." A wrestling star when he came to school in Grade Seven, Boy K, in his interview, reflected upon how he also switched

from spring baseball to crew, and now rowing is something he has “grown to love and loves being on the water.” As much as varsity athletics may get the coverage in the school newspaper, it was gratifying to hear several boys mention how much they have enjoyed their Junior Varsity experience too. For Boy F, “the biggest part of J.V. hockey for me is probably hanging out in the locker room before and after a game. The skating is enjoyable, but the hanging out on the bus for away games, it’s just fun.”

Traditions

As Belmont Hill approaches its centenary in 2023, the school has become even more aware of those traditions which have stood the test of time since its founding. For one of the boys, “traditions like The Facultones, Milk & Cookies, The Loop, Chapel Talks, and the panel carving in my senior spring have become some of my favourite memories of Belmont Hill.” Other boys reflected on the importance of the camping trips at the beginning of Grades Seven (Camp Burgess) and Grade Nine (Camp Beckett), and how these trips served to establish new friendships, and how the Grade 12 trip to Camp Cody cemented existing friendships. All of the boys have participated in either community service projects and/or school trips abroad. In fact, for some of the boys, their time off campus, be it a 10 day trip or a semester / school year away, had the greatest impact on their Belmont Hill story. Likewise, for some boys, their participation in some new community service traditions, and existing peer tutoring programs added to their Belmont Hill story of success and struggles in the classroom and on the fields of play.

Conclusions

As I write this conclusion in May of 2019, the boys are just a few weeks away from their graduation. I still see them on campus and we have a formal senior banquet in late May in which the senior class receives their copy of *The Sundial*. We chat often about the class and the oral history interview and how grateful they are to have had the time to contemplate their journey through our school. This opportunity to write and reflect back on their time at Belmont Hill was also captured well by several of the boys in their responses to my survey question, “at your 25th reunion, how will you describe your experience at Belmont Hill.” Some of the responses included the following:

"I would describe my experience as one with many stories and hardships, but it would always go back to how I would always fall back on my friends to pick me up."

"Life changing. The bonds I have formed, the lessons I have learned, and the memories I have made have changed me for the better. I believe that Belmont Hill has shaped me into a better person, mentally, physically, and emotionally, and I cannot express how lucky I am to have had the privilege to attend a school like Belmont Hill."

Implications for Future Practice and Research

The success of this action research project was best echoed by Mr. Leonardis (personal communication, 2019), my mentor and the teacher of the non-fiction writing course, who opined that "Dave's contributions to our class brought a lot of value. The *Storycorps* project exposed the boys to this amazing endeavor. They got to hear some inspirational stories from others and then experiment with interviewing one of their own relatives over the Thanksgiving break. The project on their Belmont Hill journey was a really important one. They were given the time and opportunity to reflect on their years at our school, where they struggled, how they thrived, and how it will stay with them. I plan on making it a regular assignment in the class in the years to come." As the Head of the English Department, Mr. Leonardis is also in a position to move this action research project into the curriculum of the other teachers of the non-fiction writing course

As Belmont Hill approaches its centenary in 2023, I can see an oral history archive of both current and former students becoming an integral part of telling the story of the school. Of course, it may be that keeping this project as an option for English teachers of the non-fiction writing course is more likely. Our grade 12 boys have many demands put upon them during the Fall of their senior year from finishing their college application process to the day-to-day requirements of a heavy academic and athletic workload. However, this is also a time when the boys are thinking about their legacy at school and what the prior number of years has meant to them in the short and long term. The project will become part of the curriculum for Mr. Leonardis as he continues to teach the non-fiction writing course and this may also include his English Department colleagues. Likewise, as the faculty advisor for *The Sundial*, I can envision

incorporating these oral history interviews, via a QR code, into the Yearbook. Lastly, in looking towards 2023, the school now has an archivist and a soon to be completed new school archives space, which will serve as a repository of recordings and preserving The Story of Belmont Hill. The archivist has committed to also interviewing and recording the stories told about the school by alumni and retired teachers.

Reflection Statement

This action research project has been one of my most enjoyable professional development opportunities. The chance to meet in Australia during the IBSC 2018 conference with like-minded colleagues from around the world was very gratifying. In fact, I will be taking a group of Belmont Hill students in June 2019 to Scots College and The Shore School in Sydney, and Christ's College in Christchurch, New Zealand, as faculty from those schools were on my action research team. The hope is to begin conversations about enhancing exchange possibilities for our students. I have had the pleasure of going on a couple of school trips (to Ireland and South Africa) with my project mentor, Mr. David Leonardis, and so it was so gratifying to be able to go to his non-fiction writing class each day and see this master teacher in action. It reaffirmed for me the reason that Mr. Leonardis holds our Ryan Family Teacher / Coach Chair, a well-deserved honour.

Perhaps even more importantly, it was so nice to be back in a classroom with Grade 12 students during the Fall of their senior year. I taught our International Affairs senior elective several years ago and happened to have in that class, students I had previously taught when they were in Grade Nine. The growth in maturity, intellectual curiosity, and personal insights was a wonder to behold. Likewise, the day-to-day "banter" between the boys, before, sometimes during, and after class also helped to reinforce the brotherhood that many of the boys believe help in defining their time at Belmont Hill.

On a final note, I will mention this is my second time doing IBSC action research, having also participated in the 2010-2011 Action Research cycle on Boys and Libraries, and focusing on boys and reading using electronic devices. Both rounds of action research have allowed me to become a better reader, teacher, and researcher, and one who has an even greater

understanding on the lives and stories of boys. It has been an honour to meet and learn from other educators from around the world for whom the teaching of boys is so important. I look forward to doing another round of Action Research in the future!

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