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## SpeakUP: The Power of Writing and Turning Toward Trouble with Young People

James E. Fredricksen

*Boise State University*, jim.fredricksen@gmail.com

Amanda Micheletty

*Boise State University*, amicheletty@gmail.com

Nicholas Darlinton

*Vallivue School District*, nicholas.darlinton@vallivue.org

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## **Cover Page Footnote**

The authors would like to acknowledge and thank each member of SpeakUP for all that we continue to learn from you.

## PRACTICE

# SpeakUP: The Power of Writing and Turning Toward Trouble with Young People

JIM FREDRICKSEN, AMANDA MICHELETTY, & NICHOLAS DARLINTON

A group of high schoolers sit around a coffee shop table at the beginning of their weekly meeting. The group, SpeakUP, provides space for young people to speak up and write about the issues they see in their communities. The group explores and writes in different genres for different purposes and audiences, trying out many strategies. During the first 18 months that SpeakUP met, we—as leaders—toiled to invent interesting and new ways to begin meetings. Then, we hit one at the heart of the things that the group wanted to explore together: “Tell about a time in the last week when you heard something that didn’t sit well with you, and you either chose to speak up or not to speak up.”

In a recent meeting, for instance, the group shared some moments from their week:

- A peer in an AP Literature class shared a subtly racist comment,
- A teammate on the tennis team says that transgender people don’t even exist, despite the fact that a transgender teammate is right there in the middle of the conversation, and
- An older woman in the community unapologetically shares sexist remarks.

These are the moments when it becomes clear to our group that the way we experience the world differ from others – and when these differences become visible, we have to decide how we come to understand them and how we respond to them. This is the core of our thinking: we focus on trouble in order to make sense of the stories we read, write, and live in.

By “trouble” we mean any tensions, dilemmas, uncertainties, ambiguities, and surprises that we –and the young people we lead – might experience and puzzle us. We use “trouble” deliberately and distinctly from the more common idea of “conflict,” because we see conflict as focusing on confrontation (see the “versus” in person vs. person, person vs. nature, person vs self, and so on) while “trouble” captures

the broad ways young people might experience their day-to-day lives. By inviting young people to identify the significant but subtle troubles in their lives, we find new possibilities in how and in what young people write.

Recounting these troubling moments allows us to share—without judgment—how we engage with these moments and the constellation of expectations, hopes, assumptions, histories, and possibilities that swirl together to shape our stories and our responses to them. Focusing on the moments when we chose to speak up or to not speak up helps us to see the ways in which power circulates in our day-to-day lives and to see where it might be possible for us to change.

## The Story of SpeakUP

The three of us have worked together through the local writing project site. Two of us, Amanda and Nicholas, lead high school students in English classrooms, while one of us, Jim, leads pre-service teachers. In the Spring of 2014, we decided to inquire into different models of “change,” because we saw young people in high school classrooms struggle with ways they might change their communities, and we saw change within our school communities to be painstakingly slow or flat-out difficult to imagine. With these challenges in mind, we decided to do what we do best – read, share and connect our experiences, write scenes and questions from the moments that puzzled us, and then imagine ways we might try to move forward with colleagues and with young people.

Two texts shaped our initial thinking, *Storytelling for Social Justice* by Lee Anne Bell (2010) and “Re-visioning Action: Participatory Action Research and Indigenous Theories of Change” by Eve Tuck (2009). In Bell’s text, we learned about the different ways stories can work in communities, namely as stock stories, concealed stories, resistance stories, and transformative stories. Naming the ways in which stories work in communities helped us to consider the kinds of stories we were or were not privileging in our classrooms. It led

us to ask, “How are we helping students see the ways stories are privileged, powerful, and influencing them and their communities?”

To guide our thinking about how to organize and inquire with young people about change in our communities, we worked with the four concepts Eve Tuck uses in sharing indigenous theories of change – sovereignty, contention, balance, and relationships. “Sovereignty” called us to consider young people as full participants with a “full realization of rights” to their social and cultural identities in their communities. “Contention” required us to consider the processes we might encourage young people to engage in as they educated themselves and as they identified the issues they saw and experienced in their communities. “Balance” meant we encouraged young people to consider the truths others in the community might bring to a situation. “Relationships” meant we created space where young people could lead, where they would feel safe in understanding others and different ideas, and where we could write, share, and inquire with them.

We wanted to develop a safe space to turn towards the trouble of being on the margins, to create ways - through narrative - to question the center, and to write with the purpose of changing our communities. What we have found in the process of working with these young people has extended and challenged our initial intentions. By first working outside the confines of a classroom, we believed we could see our schools—mostly white and mostly places where analysis and argumentation center the curriculum and relationships—in new ways.

That is, working together with young people outside our classes helped us re-imagine our work with students in the classroom. By questioning and re-imagining the tensions, hopes, and uncertainties we encounter in our lives, the participants of SpeakUP engage in writing and thinking that reflect and cultivate the authority of their own voices, and this has helped us to keep thinking of our classrooms in ways that empower young people.

Since it began a few years ago, SpeakUP has been situated in a more rural context, and it has included about 12 young people, though the number has fluctuated from year-to-year. We have been guided by Tuck’s principles in forming and organizing the group

- by recognizing the rights and power young people bring to the group (sovereignty),
- by focusing on a range of perspectives and experiences (balance),
- by honoring what connects and distances us and others

in our communities (relationships), and

- by leveraging the power of writing and narrative to identify the trouble we see and experience (contention).

With these principles in mind about how we would form and organize SpeakUP, we inquire with young people about which stories are prominent in our communities, which are hidden, which act as forms of resistance and transformation. We write, share, and inquire into our stories together, so that we can understand them and respond to them in authentic ways that reflect our values.

### Turning Toward the Trouble

We believe that narrative is about trouble and how people respond to it. Narrative, we believe, asks us to pay attention to the trouble people face and to inquire into the roots that led to the trouble and to consider multiple ways people might respond to the trouble they face.

To help young people in SpeakUp and in our classrooms with this kind of thinking, we turn to one heuristic that focuses on understanding people or on creating characters (Fredricksen, 2012). We call it T-SWAG, and it asks young people to consider their own or others’ stories (Figure One).

<b>Trouble:</b> What is the break in what the person / character expected, hoped for, or assumed? (e.g., surface-level: a car ride, a meal, money; deeper-level: acceptance, respect, dignity)	
<b>Goals:</b> What does a person / character want? (e.g., wage or gender equity, having a safe home, making a friend)	<b>Stakes:</b> Why is that goal important to a person or character? What is at risk? What could the person or character potentially gain or lose? (e.g., concrete things, like a car, a location, a television set; abstract things, like safety, honor, pride, or life)
<b>Action:</b> What steps does a person / character take toward that goal? (e.g., initiating a conversation, standing up for someone, responding to something)	<b>World:</b> What opportunities or constraints does a person / character see in their world? What relevant rules are stated or unstated? (e.g. power structures, family units, etc)

Figure One: T-SWAG for understanding people or creating characters

When young people bring their moments of speaking up or not speaking up, we inquire into the situation by working our way through the heuristic in order to understand the perspectives present in those moments. We encourage the

## SpeakUP: The Power of Writing and Turning Toward Trouble with Young People

SpeakUP members to write and explore these perspectives in a range of forms, such as flash fiction, narrative non-fiction, poetry, and more. In our attempt to be writing peers and not “teachers,” we write and talk as group members about texts that deal with some kind of social or cultural trouble in an effort to open up informal conversations about what the piece calls us to as writers.

For example, Amanda and Nicholas brought to the group a piece of flash fiction, “Lazarus” by Liliana Blum (2008), as our inspiration text for that evening’s writing session. After reading and laughing our way through the story, we discussed the possibilities that the trouble of the narrative brought up for us, in this case, a rewriting of the Biblical story of Lazarus, who, rising rotten from his time in the grave, comes home and is not welcome.

We asked questions about what we noticed about the piece: “What jumps out to you or surprises you about this story?” After some conversation about the grotesque but comical imagery and the way the author challenges the original story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, we discussed how we might address trouble of our own in a similar way, noting the possibilities inherent in the author’s use of humor and the potential to reframe and re-contextualize a myth or story from our culture.

Kathy (all young people’s names are pseudonyms), a senior whose parents immigrated from Laos, responded to the model text by rewriting a scene from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, a text she encountered in her AP English class. She later titled her comedic script, “Hamlietta,” and, in re-contextualizing the story, made the central character a female who, with irony and insight, addresses the double-standards of gender expectations within a patriarchal family.

By grappling with the trouble of her own experiences within traditional power structures in her immediate family and in school, Kathy’s response reframed and challenged the story of *Hamlet* to add her voice to a more relevant conversation about how young women are positioned and limited within families and social structures.

Weeks later we read Sharon Olds’s “On the Subway,” (1987) and, after the same process of discussing the possibilities the trouble of the poem brought up for us, we listened to responses from participants addressing similar experiences with racial assumptions. Pamela, another senior, reimagined the scenario of “On the Subway” as a conversation between two other disparate voices: her own and the recently elected President Trump, whose platform conflicted with her own experiences as an African American living in a largely white

community.

In both these examples, we see young people reading model texts as forms of inquiry, inspiration, and imagination. They identify the trouble at play in each model text, and then re-write that trouble with different characters, goals, actions, and contexts. Doing so helps them to see where trouble lives in their own lives and to identify where that power might be at play in their roles within their own communities, such as family members or as citizens.

### Looking Before and After the Trouble

Like electricity in a circuit, we believe power is relational and, in many ways, felt but not seen (Rex and Schiller, 2009; Warren and Mapp, 2011; Kirkland, 2013). We notice where power is located when we run up against forces that stop the movement of power to and from us. Spotting trouble helps us find and name the power that is at play. For example, once we spot and turn toward trouble, we are able to inquire into why we believe this moment to be troubling and to imagine a repertoire of responses we might take in response to the trouble. Sometimes we don’t know what to say. Sometimes we feel as if we don’t have autonomy to act or to speak back to authority. Sometimes we don’t have any hope that speaking up can affect any change.

When members of SpeakUP share examples of moments when we chose not to speak up, we often notice power that might have seemed invisible. When we share these moments, we are able to reflect on the power that led to the trouble and the power that we have in responding to the trouble. That is, even when we don’t speak up in troubling moments, we can turn toward the tensions and ambiguities of our experiences in order to better understand them (Figure Two).

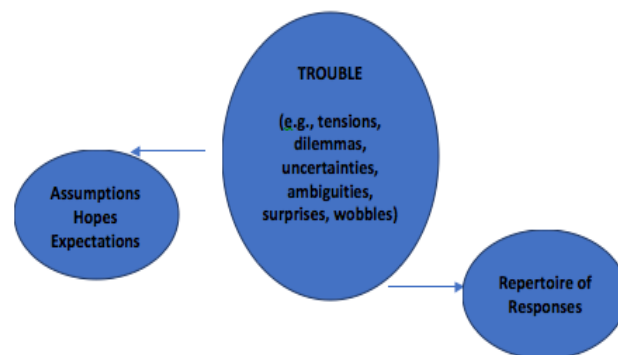


Figure Two: Find the trouble, and then look before and after it.

To see the power at play before and after the trouble we face, we often ask writers to re-mix texts, like blackout poems from newspaper stories, fairy tale mash-ups, Adbuster-like re-mixes of advertisements, and text changes from one kind of text (e.g., poem) to another kind of text (e.g., comic strip). Andrea, a sophomore, arrived at one SpeakUP meeting ready to share a story of writing while she sat at church the week before. She found herself sitting in a pew with a set of reading materials, including the hymnal and a church bulletin. As we began our SpeakUP meeting, she discussed the poems she created with the words she remixed from the texts she found in church. “I just wanted to make them my own,” she told us. Andrea was handed some words, and she made them into her own, and by doing so, she spoke to the trouble she had with one-way conversations. The SpeakUP group inquired with Andrea about why the re-mixing of hymnals and church bulletins felt like an empowering act to her. Throughout her life, Andrea explained, church was always a place where the rules of etiquette were unwritten and understood to be followed without question. The group asked her to keep inquiring, why might the church think those unwritten rules of etiquette might be a good idea? The group came up with some possibilities- tradition, history, stability, and power – that led Andrea to ask new questions about the story she tells about herself.

Like Andrea, when we look before and after “trouble,” we can ask ourselves, “What’s the way I think things ought to be?” Asking this question of ourselves and of others means that we can trace our answers back to the assumptions that underlie them: “What might someone have to believe (or might have experienced) in order to think things ought to be this way?” “Where might those beliefs have their roots?” In turn, we can also ask, “What paths we might take in order to get us closer to the way we think things ought to be?” Generating multiple possibilities, like in Andrea’s remix of church materials and SpeakUP’s inquiry into it, gives us the power to rehearse responses or to be strategic in choosing which path we hope to take.

## From SpeakUP to Our Classrooms

Robin is a freshman who arrived at a SpeakUP meeting with a particular moment from her week. Target was recently in the news regarding its bathroom policy and gender identity, and Robin was surprised by one of her close friend’s stance on the issue. Our work on thinking about trouble guided the group inquiry and conversation. The group named the

trouble: two friends have different beliefs on gender. Others asked Robin about the opportunity to speak up and ultimately the group revealed that Robin wanted to understand what led her friend to believe what she did.

Robin responded to the tensions of this interaction by writing a series of questions in the form of a poem. Her attempt to understand the limited perspective of a friend demonstrated what has become central purposes of our SpeakUP writing practices: we can engage meaningfully with the experiences that puzzle us; we can add our voices to conversations we feel silenced by; we can turn towards the trouble in our lives with as much curiosity and openness as possible.

As classroom teachers, we wonder what we can learn from Robin and the SpeakUP group. We wonder about how our curriculum and the kinds of writing we ask our students to do can be more meaningful, authentic, and responsive to their lives.

Amanda works in a private, International Baccalaureate school, with a largely white, middle/upper class demographic. The school focuses its attention on students passing the I.B. exams. In order to work toward re-framing writing assessments in a way that connects the school’s focus on I.B. exams to the students’ lives, Amanda started to ask questions rooted in Bell’s notions of how stories work in communities as stock stories, as hidden stories, as resistance stories, and as transformative stories. These questions include the following:

- How can I help students recognize their privilege? How do I help students consider who gets to tell our stories and whose stories are privileged over others?
- How do I help students respond authentically to the world of text around them? How do I help them add their voices to external conversations while still meeting the standards of I.B. assessments?
- How do I help student encounter and then move in solidarity with stories on the margins? How do we engage with and generate stories of transformations?

Amanda works to broaden the school’s curricular focus to embrace and to make explicit the trouble and tensions of the narratives we encounter. A key move is to help students move from simply responding to stories that address issues of social justice (reflecting on a topic, arguing for this side or that) to writing in solidarity and empathy with multiple ways of seeing and understanding the people and world around them.

One example is with 11th grade students. Amanda origi-

nally asked students to address the style, structure, and meaning of an advertisement, and then she later shifted the assignment to focus on questions that led students to turn toward the ambiguities, tensions, and surprises of an advertisement. Instead of analyzing what an advertisement could mean, students began to ask questions about what the unintentional consequences of the ad might be, to address ideas in the ad that surprised them, and to bring up the tensions of race and gender within ads without being asked directly by the teacher to do so. By positioning themselves as writers who were joining a conversation, rather than reporting on one, students were more authentic in their responses and more open to seeing possibilities and to finding solidarity with perspectives beyond their own.

Justine is an example. As a writer who often struggles to add depth to her analyses and who often requires fixed parameters about what to notice in a text or what meaning to make out of it, Justine is often hesitant and, in turn, inauthentic in her writing because she worries about having the “wrong answer.” In her first encounter with the advertisement assignment she was visibly frustrated and insecure. Things shifted, though, on her second encounter with the ads when she engaged in the process of turning toward the trouble of the advertisements. Instead of a fixed idea about what the ads might mean, Justine was able to add original ideas into her writing and into the broader conversation about gender that the ad brought up for her – territory that in the past would have been far too ambiguous and uncertain for her to tread.

In this particular process of turning toward the trouble in advertisements, students were first asked to respond to the advertisements by inhabiting the subject of the advertisements. Carol Ann Duffy’s poem “Standing Female Nude” (1985) served as a model text, and students responded by considering the ways in which the subject of the ad was potentially misrepresented. Students could also take on the perspective of someone who was the target audience of the ad in order to consider the problematic stereotypes or assumptions the ad played into. Because Justine was asked to empathize with the subject of the text and to face the assumptions of the ad by imagining what it would be like to be the ad’s subject or target, Justine positioned herself to understand the text – and herself – in a new way. This helped her later on when she drafted an essay comparing and connecting her experience with the ad to the greater conversation about how gender is represented in the media. In short, the opening up of a perspective by responding authentically to the trouble

of the ad helped Justine to find new ways of finding and expressing her ideas.

Like Amanda’s focus on turning toward trouble in order to invite authentic responses, Nicholas worked with his 10th graders in his rural and public high school to enter a conversation John Steinbeck forwards in *Of Mice and Men*. In Steinbeck’s story, Lennie and George are on an American Quest to find work and to work on their own terms. With this quest as a frame, Nicholas asked students to interview people in their communities about how their work contributes to their dreams and to the “American Dream.” In making this move, Nicholas intended for his students to enter and engage in Steinbeck’s conversation. Students reported on a range of trouble the people in their lives face in connecting their work to their dreams—many people interviewed reported that their work was not living up to their dreams or to the broader American Dream. Students began to see how the story of the American Dream shapes the stories the people in their lives tell about themselves, about their work, and about what is possible in their communities.

These are subtle, but significant moves in our work with students. The work we do with SpeakUP has helped us see how our work with young people should aim to help them understand their own stories and the stories of others. Once we turn our attention to these stories, we can see how those stories shape our communities and how those stories make visible where power lies.

To be sure, our work is not finished, nor is it a panacea. We keep asking young people to think about questions, like whose trouble gets to count? What stories are hiding, resisting, or trying to change the stock stories? If I have power, then am I trying to “lift up” others (where I can keep my privilege) or am I working toward being in solidarity with them so that power and privilege is shared?

In working with young people to write, share, and inquire about the stories that fill our lives, we invite them to turn toward the trouble in order to better understand it, to see what led to the moment, and to consider a range of ways we might move forward. This, we believe, is at the heart of narrative thinking and the power and possibilities that lie within the literature we read and the stories young people write and share with others.

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**Jim Fredricksen** is a former teacher of middle school English language arts students who now serves as an English educator and co-director of the Boise State Writing Project at Boise State University.

**Amanda Michelety** formerly taught English to students in high school and now teaches in the First Year Writing Program at Boise State University. She is working on a M.A. in Rhetoric and Composition and is interested in how students, across generations, can access their own agency and empower one another through community literacy practices.

**Nicholas Darlinton** teaches high school English and serves on the board of two literary non-profits, Idaho Scholastic Writing Awards and Death Rattle Writers Festival. He is primarily interested in creating courses that reflect the real reading and writing practices of adult literary communities.



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