
Invisible Cities of Strength

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This article, and the one which follows, are the texts of speeches given by two students at a memorial for Michael Armstrong held on 6 July 2016 at Bread Loaf School of English, Middlebury College, Vermont, USA.

Last summer, I had the privilege of taking Michael Armstrong's Calvino class. For my final project, Michael allowed me to write a unit plan for one of our most beloved texts, *Invisible Cities*.

When I went home to my students in Kentucky, I couldn't wait to teach this book. And sure enough, the students in my creative writing class loved it. They loved *Invisible Cities* because it is beautiful and heartbreaking, but also because Michael taught me how to loosen up and trust my students and their imaginations. I stopped worrying so much about completing individual lessons, and focused entirely on student engagement and interest. I let them pick what they wanted to do, and how they wanted to discuss the book.

Then something magnificent happened. My students and I stopped talking about Calvino, and started asking questions about the Invisible Cities in our community. We took the book we were reading and found a way to apply it to our lives. Together, we decided to spend our time in class writing a book about six invisible cities, or rather disappearing historical communities, in our own Woodford County, Kentucky. This project (like all Bread Loaf Teacher Network projects) started small and became huge. I would like to take a moment and share the end results of that project with you today. This is a digital copy of our book.[1] We produced both physical copies and digital copies.

Together, my students ...

1. Wrote a 150-page book that combines historical non-fiction, poetry, prose and photography. This book tells the story of our six invisible cities. We have currently sold over 100 copies of the book as part of our class fundraiser.

2. Created physical displays that exhibit each of the invisible cities. These exhibits were set up at our local community festival, Spark. At this festival the displays were seen by over 1500 members of the community. They were then set up in the school and stayed in the front lobby for several months.
3. Wrote a play based on the real-life stories of these invisible cities and presented it at our community festival to an audience of over a hundred people.

In the end, this project joined together five high school classes across disciplines (history, science, engineering and English) and sixty students. Together we discovered that learning is an imaginative, collaborative, multimodal and interdisciplinary experience. By which I mean, we learned to be readers, historians, researchers, designers, photographers, writers, editors, engineers and builders. We learned that the differences in our imaginations make us stronger.

That's the thing about changing the world. It starts out with one person, one attitude, one belief, one book, one opportunity – to take the positivity and imagination that Michael imparted to me, and give it back to someone else. Because when you teach teachers, something that so many of you in this room do so brilliantly and with such passion, when you impact on and change the life of a teacher, they impact on and change the life of their students. The work that Michael Armstrong did is incalculable. He gave me a book that changed my life. And then I gave that book to my students. Is there anything more significant that one human being can do for another? Brains love books.

So I would like to end with a quote from one of my students. For part of their final task, I asked my creative writing class to reflect on their work in reference to *Invisible Cities*. This is Natalie Heigel, holding a picture of her historical invisible city, Pisgah. This is what she had to say:

In every avid reader's life, there comes a book that completely changes their perspective of this world, sometimes even going so far as to change the individual themselves. *Invisible Cities* by Italo Calvino was that book for me. Like the city of Ersilia, in which relations are shown by an endless maze of string, there exists an innumerable amount of connections between *Invisible Cities* and I, making me stronger than I could have foreseen.

Thank you Michael for making all of us all stronger.

Note

- [1] The digital book referred to can be found via these links:
https://issuu.com/wchsdigitalmagazinestand/docs/invisible_cities_final_pdf_2_05__1/1 or <http://goo.gl/fos9hB>

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