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Re-thinking Personal Narrative in the Pedagogy of Writing Teacher Preparation

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Cover Page Footnote
Acknowledgements Mary and April thank their students at Michigan State University for so gamely participating in the partnership described here. We are all grateful to feedback from colleagues who attended our session, Rediscovering Praxis: Making Connections in English Teacher Education, at the Biennial Conference on English Education at Fordham University in June 2011. In particular, we thank Bonnie Sunstein for comments that substantially shaped our thinking as we wrote and revised the paper.

End Notes 1. See wra150023.wordpress.com for more detail about course conceptualization and organization. 2. For more information about the course conceptualization and organization, see wra150023.wordpress.com 3. We did not have permission to video or audio record the conversations, so we rely on our notes. 4. We do think practicing evaluation is necessary work for future writing teachers. Indeed, later in the semester, teacher candidates worked with April's rubric to assign grades to the final narratives of the first-year writers, an exercise the first year writers and April never saw.


About the Author

Justin Young has taught writing at City College of New York, the University of Oklahoma, and Claremont McKenna College. Currently, he is an Assistant Professor of English at Eastern Washington University, where he directs the composition program and Writers’ Center. His research focuses on literacy instruction at both the K-12 and college level. Specifically, his work explores the ways that improved reading and writing instruction can better prepare students across the K-16 continuum to communicate effectively in both print and digital environments and to succeed in college.

Re-thinking Personal Narrative in the Pedagogy of Writing Teacher Preparation

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The role that personal narrative writing should play in the teaching of English in secondary schools is a question that members of our field have returned to again and again. Further, it is a question that onlookers of our work—both critical and supportive—have argued about. At one extreme, David Coleman, the dominant figure behind the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts, has notoriously said about personal writing that “as you grow up in this world you realize people really don’t give a shit about what you feel or what you think” (10). Yet multiple voices in the field of English education have drawn out the complex connections between personal and academic writing, making compelling arguments for the importance of the former; both in its own right and as a contributor to developing competence in the latter (see as just a few examples Hillocks, Narrative; Fredrickens, Wilhelm, and Smith; Kittle; Smagorinsky, Augustine, and O’Donnell-Allen). We find their arguments compelling. We see personal narrative as one of the many ways people make arguments in the world of discourse in school and beyond; further, we have seen how students engaged in personal narrative writing so often find themselves drawn into experimentation with different approaches in a text, deep revision, and a commitment to precise expression that we see as critical to learning writing.

Our own desire to prepare English language arts teachers to teach personal narrative well stems also from our sense of the socially mediated identity work that written and oral narrative texts accomplish in people’s lives. Narrative is one of the primary ways that people understand, experience, and create reality (Bruner). As described by Bakhtin, narrative is dialogic. Any utterance made in speech or in text emerges as a part of an ongoing conversation, begun long before an individual speaks (or writes!) and carrying on long after. In this way, all stories respond to previous stories and anticipate stories that will be told in the future. Our narratives join other narratives in a tangled web of dialogue through which we take up, reject, and reappropriate the words of others while inviting listeners to do the same with our words. Further, they vary in shape and function according to culture (Cazden). In addition to being dialogic and contextually embodied, narratives are also “intersubjective—belonging to the context as well as to the author;” (Dias 113). In this way, narrative is implicated in self-authoring. Mead suggests that, in part, we author ourselves as a result of our own objective introjection regarding our thoughts and behaviors. In order to accomplish this work, we must become an ‘other’ to ourselves. That process of self-consciousness, Mead contends, remains social in nature as we human beings take up the position of an “other” to interrogate ourselves (215). Viewing narrative in this manner, as socially and dialogically shaped in the context of culture and instrumental to a process of self-authoring, pushes us to re-consider narrative writing in terms of what it might do for students, both in and beyond classrooms.

However, understanding personal narrative in these ways is not the same as teaching it well—or of preparing teachers to do so. As Hillocks reminds us in his introduction to a book for teachers on teaching narrative (Narrative), too often we “teach” narrative by reading examples of narratives and then assigning narratives, failing to teach strategies that might result in good narratives. Even more rarely do narrative texts written in school (or any other kinds of texts written in school, for that matter) actually go anywhere beyond the teacher, thus failing to offer students experience in negotiating meanings with readers, working out the versions of self in context that narrative writing can foster. Teaching personal narrative well, in ways that are consistent with our view of personal narrative’s value and the identity work it can support, has proven challenging. In the pages that follow, we describe and reflect on one effort to do so in a teacher education setting, in a class-to-class partnership between teacher candidates and first-year college writers. We introduce the example not as a success story or an exemplar, but rather as a problematic case (Bush) causing us to reconsider a) our sense of the purposes and possibilities of personal narrative writing in secondary schools and b) the uses and pedagogies of personal narrative writing in English teacher education.

A Narrative Writing Partnership

The writing partnership discussed here occurred in and across the English education and first year writing programs at a large public university. Mary taught a writing workshop course for secondary English teacher candidates in the English department, and April taught a first year composition course that was a university requirement for undergraduates (most, but not all, were first year students; we call these students “first-year writers” for simplicity). Through narrative writing, Mary wanted the teacher candidates to a) write narratives, b) critically reflect on and expand their own processes as narrative writers and
Ignoring Voices From Excluded Cultures.” The first-year writers engaged in ongoing reading, research, and writing about the cultural contexts of the school to which they were assigned, as well as about other topics that interested them. “know their audiences, and to envision writing as a structured process -- with different processes appropriate for different purposes and different genres appropriate to accomplish those purposes. She wanted students to grapple with what it might mean to become a teacher of writing who placed the needs of their students at the center of the instruction to work on narrative writing. The invitation is simply to compose a personal narrative. We note similar ironies in April's assignment for first-year writers. Students choosing to study a culture with which they themselves affiliated seems to build in an opportunity for the kind of identity work that narrative writing can involve. Yet in the text of the assignment, that identity work remains tacit rather than explicitly named, and we did not refer to the title “cultural narrative” at all.

In crafting assignments, then, both Mary and April faced challenges as they worked to create a purposeful context for narrative writing. To different degrees, the assignment texts obscured the potentially powerful purposes by asking students to "write a narrative for the sake of narrative writing." Admittedly, powerful factors shape our choices to label assignments as invitations to write “narrative,” rather than as invitations to do some sort of identity work advancing the purpose of becoming writing teachers or becoming cultural activists or advocates. Among these are a) writing standards, such as the CCSS and the first-year writing program curriculum guidelines, decreeing that secondary and college students must learn to write a proper narrative text; b) accountability pressures facing schools and universities (including the testing regimes in which writing teacher education occurs); and c) students’ learned legacies of writing to give the teacher what she wants for the good grade, rather than writing to accomplish meaningful work in the world.

In crafting the invitation to write personal narratives, Mary and April strove to frame purposeful contexts for students to compose narratives in both courses, paying particular attention to audience and to topics and content. We addressed audience differently across the two assignment contexts, because the audience page on 2 of her assignment, listing “go public” as part of the process for completing the assignment and elaborating, “We will share drafts of our narratives with each other and with our [first year] writing partners. If you like, distribute your narrative to other audiences beyond our class.” Rather than framing the writing partners as the chief audience for the assignment, then, she invited students to imagine their classmates, their writing partners, and others as the primary audience for their writing. Emphasizing that they were being read by a very public audience, the chief audience for the cultural narratives as pre-service English teachers interested in “(1) learning how first-year writers use narratives to write about cultures they belong to, (2) understanding the experiences of cultures that are often excluded from school culture, and (3) considering how this experience would help them to think about how to teach narratives in their future classes.” Thus the first-year writers were asked to focus on their classmates as their primary audience, whereas the teacher candidates were told that they would be sharing with the first-year writers but were asked to think about audience more broadly. We also framed the topics of the narrative and the processes of inquiry or invention differently across the two assignments. Instead of telling students to write a personal narrative before the teacher candidates to feel vulnerable as writers and students, because it is a position in which teachers so often place students.

Vulnerability in Writing the Narrative

Writers on both sides of the partnership described feeling vulnerable or fearful about narrative writing and the partnership work. It is true that the teacher candidates seemed grateful for the opportunity to write narratives, especially in the context of reflecting more openly on their writing processes. They noted that the invitation to write personal narratives to express their true feelings about teaching and learning drove all major assignments in the course.1 The narrative assignment gave students an opportunity to share and interpret individual experiences with the culture in light of and in ways that responded to or talked back to themes in other texts they had read and/or written (Assignment included in Appendix B). Throughout the semester, she asked students to don different perspectives: as writers, as students of writing, and as teachers of writing. Teacher candidates wrote “In the moment” narratives (Assignment included in Appendix A). April embedded narrative writing within a semester-long inquiry into cultures that had been silenced, misrepresented, or ignored. In most cases, students chose to study cultures they in some way identified with -- such as Black culture, Asian American culture, Turkish culture, Chinese culture, etc. Learning about the culture drove all major assignments in the course.1 The narrative assignment gave students an opportunity to share and interpret individual experiences with the culture in light of and in ways that responded to or talked back to themes in other texts they had read and/or written (Assignment included in Appendix B).

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substantive conversations, such as one group discussing different ways of defining the term "culture" and what the implications might be for teaching writing. The workshop certainly accomplished one identity-mediating goal for candidate teachers: it provided an opportunity for them to gain experience -- and in many cases, confidence -- in leading conversations about narrative writing. As one teacher candidate reflected:

I've been sort of afraid that I wouldn't know how to respond, because I really haven't done that much in terms of responding to students [narrative writing]...but it was really encouraging to realize that I do know a fair bit about the subject...There were definitely times when I was at a loss of how to express myself...but even then I knew what I wanted to say, even if I had not taught that much at that point. I think it was really helpful because it made me feel more comfortable in taking up the role of teacher of writing. In other words, it was about using narrative writing to "teach the culture" to the candidate teachers. The teacher was thus able to move beyond simply telling a story or using self-expression; rather, she articulated the value of the narrative sharing in relation to the culture she selected to study, her own life, and the lives of others. Further, though the student did not say this, she and her first-year classmates were also "teaching" the teacher candidates about teaching writing by making themselves available to the partnership in the first place. Though they were not asked to evaluate their partners' work but instead provided feedback, as teacher candidates donned the "mantle of the expert" (Bolton and Heathcote) they deployed a good deal of evaluative language, much of it praise. For example, one teacher candidate put it, "I'm very much impressed by their level of self-expression. Not once were they evasive, evocative, evocative..." They were also capable of creating work that was evocative and evocative. Color me impressed.

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as helping our future teachers think about some social-purpose-driven questions: “How does narrative do important work? What is it helpful for? For making certain kinds of points? For making points in certain contexts? For performing certain kinds of selves in given contexts?” Such an approach – focusing less on narrative qua narrative – has the merit of letting us and our teacher candidates see narrative writing much more expansively than we (and the standards discourses surrounding us) often do.

Works Cited


members of your writing group and with me. On the date the final (for now) draft is due (Feb 24), post your narrative to google docs and share your document with me (and your group members, if you like) - NOTE: This instruction may change; please stay posted!

Procedure:
1. Invent and inquire: What vivid moments do you remember? Bad memories? Good memories? Puzzling memories? Can you pinpoint moments that have been turning points or especially significant for you? Why? How? Write in your exploratory writing forum about these and related topics to get your juices and memories flowing.
2. Analyze genre: What are the characteristics of the personal narrative genre? How does Lamott’s book help you understand the genre? Find and post examples that serve as models for our narrative writing. Study several examples and consider “What makes a personal narrative effective?”
3. Draft: Drawing on your own invention work as well as the models we have considered, draft your “in the moment” narrative.
4. Respond and Revise: What can you learn by reviewing and responding to others’ narrative drafts? How can you strengthen your writing through this process? Engage in on-line peer review with your colleagues. In dialogue with these responses, revise your narrative
5. Go Public: We will share drafts of our narratives with our writing groups and with our Tier 1 writing partners. If you like, distribute your narrative to other audiences beyond our class
6. Situate your narrative: While personal narratives tend to be expressive, they also sit within broader cultural and social dialogues. Can you read your narrative, or that of a colleague, as a cultural or social artifact? Why did you choose to tell this tale, in response to this prompt? Is your narrative a story you have told before? To whom? How, if at all, does its telling change
7. Reflect: What have you learned about how to write a personal narrative? What new puzzlements or questions have been raised? Consider how you might explain to your own students not just what this genre includes, but how they might approach it by describing and reflecting on your own writing process during this assignment.

Appendix B: Writing (first year writing) Sequence One Narrative Assignment
Writing 150 (first year writing) Sequence One: Cultural Narrative Project
Background: This semester you have been asked to select a silent, silenced, misrepresented or ignored culture to study for the duration of this course. In accordance with Michigan State University’s Shared Learning Outcomes and the theme of this course, you will write, read, research and share this culture in many different ways. It is my hope that you will bring voice to your culture selection by tracing it through an assortment of writing projects.
Assignment: Project One gives you an opportunity to reflect on your individual experience(s) with the culture you selected to focus on this semester. Since the assignment is a narrative piece, you may consider telling a story that gives voice to your selected culture. In other words, how could you use this space to tell a story that (un)silences, (re)represents, or (un)ignores your culture of choice? At the same time, your narrative should move beyond simply telling a story or striving for self-expression; your narrative should also stress the value of this experience in relation to the culture you are studying, your life, and the lives of others.
Audience: For this project, you are writing for students who are studying at MSU to be English teachers. These pre-service teachers are interested in learning about how tier-one writing students use personal narratives to write about the cultures that they are part of. Your narrative will help these students generate an understanding of: 1) cultures that have been excluded from popular culture, 2) how to teach a personal narrative, and 3) how to teach the “writing process” in their future classes.
Requirements:
- 3-5 pages, Times New Roman, 12 pt font, double spaced, typed in Microsoft Word
Rubrics: This project is worth 10% of your overall grade. The following criteria will be used to assess your final draft:
- Focus: staying on topic/ purpose visible (20 points)
- Development: details/examples/ well supported (20 points)
- Arrangement: effective arrangement strategies/ make sense/ supports purpose and audience (15 points)
- Audience: audience awareness, ethos-pathos-logos, voice, tone (20 points)
- Language: free from surface errors/ sentence structure, (15 points)
- Overall: met the requirements of the assignment, including drafting, page requirements, footer, IRA activities, (10 points)