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 Bi-ennial 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.

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About the Author


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; Fredrickson, 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 writer!) 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 embedded, narratives are also “intersubjective—belonging to the context as well as to the author.” (Diaz 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
c) learn to teach narrative writing. A goal across the course was to expand students’ repertoires for teaching writing beyond the 5-paragraph theme that historically pervades secondary schooling and which was likely to be emphasized in many of their school placements (Johnson et al.). 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). Mary and April sought to frame narrative writing as purposeful social and dialogic work, we did not always realize or attend to the boundaries and challenges facing instructors trying to facilitate rhetorically purposeful narrative writing in formal educational settings including secondary English courses, first year composition courses, and writing teacher preparation courses. A few specific challenges are shared in more detail below.

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 a required course. Yet, their reflections on their writing processes. They narrated the “freedom” and “liberation” of the invitation to write personal narratives (vs. academic arguments). Yet despite their enthusiasm for exploring their “own personal writing style[s],” students were also worried about sharing their narrative writing with colleagues and with first-year writers: it seemed to up the ante for the writing, creating a feeling of vulnerability that they were not accustomed to (amusingly–high achieving students. One teacher candidate connected this feeling to a scarcity of invitations for personal writing as a secondary and college student: “First of all, this is probably the only personal narrative I have written during my prior studies. Prior to this paper, I had not written any form of personal essay since my freshman year of high school. Second semester we were accustomed to feeling vulnerable in my writing.” Emotions of fear, judgement, and sorrow (e.g., the reference to potentially making writers cry through harsh critique) lace through teacher candidates’ and— to a lesser extent— first-year writers’ reflections and responses to the narrative writing and to their roles in the narrative writing partnership.

The phenomenon comports with Brandt’s finding that while reading is associated with favorable memories (e.g., sharing books with family) that is often associated with negative emotions and identities with writing while constructing a new— and perhaps, more positively emotion valenced— set of experiences and identities with writing? What set of conditions might make it possible for teacher candidates to undertake the painful emotional work that narrative writing may invite in the context of a class required for teacher certification? Yet we also realize our goals. Those missed opportunities become fodder for thinking about the challenges facing instructors trying to accomplish meaningful work in the world.

Framing Purposeful Contexts for Narrative Writing

Mary and April strove to frame purposeful contexts for students to compose narratives in both courses, paying close attention to page 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 our groups 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 their peers as equally relevant audiences for the writing. In her notes, she reflected on the invitation to share narratives, suggesting: “How can we design narrative writing invitations and partnerships that respect and acknowledge potentially painful or negative memories and associations with writing while constructing a new— and perhaps, more positively emotion valenced— set of experiences and identities with writing? What set of conditions might make it possible for teacher candidates to undertake the painful emotional work that narrative writing may invite in the context of a class required for teacher certification? Yet we also find value in the discomfort that students, particularly candidates, felt in the exchange: we value the opportunity for teacher candidates to feel vulnerable as writers and students, because it is a position in which teachers so often place students.

The “expert” writing partner

Having drafted their respective personal narratives, the teacher candidates and the first-year writers met for a face-to-face workshop session, five weeks into the fifteen-week semester. As you will see, the ironic characterization that Mary and April initially conveyed toward this encounter is justified. In the description, we quote from notes made by both instructors on sessions before, during, and after the workshop as well as students’ written reflections on the process.

Writers approached the workshop with different aims. For the first-year writers, it was a chance to work with their designated partners for the writing; for the teacher candidates, it was an encounter with an audience for their writing but also an encounter with a version of the audience for their emerging identities as teachers. The purpose of the workshop conversations, as set by the instructors, was for the first-year writers to receive feedback— from both their own classmates and the teacher candidates— on the first drafts of their narrative. Although teacher candidates were also beginning to write in-the-moment narratives as part of their professional writing. April shared one example—a classmate’s consideration of 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 the writer she wants for the good grade, rather than writing to accomplish meaningful work in the world.

In the second workshop, a helpful move toward a more fully social, dialogic, and purposeful approach to personal narrative writing would have been to make the identity work more explicitly a part of the assignment, for example articulating that a key assignment is to move forward on the journey toward “becoming a cultural activist” (April’s assignment) and to “becoming a narrative writing teacher” (Mary’s assignment). How we present that goal matters, though, lest the assignment simply repeat the same work that students already identified in their personal narratives. The challenge is to do justice to the situation where students are persuaded that narratives can accomplish meaningful social work for them, rather than a more didactic pedagogical situation where students digest and produce the narrative form in ways described and prescribed by a teacher on an assignment sheet.

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identities as writers and de-emphasized their identities as future teachers might have helped enact a more intersubjective stance. What might disrupt that pervasive evaluative script that saturates most teacher candidates' experiences of schooling? One possibility is a partnership where teacher candidates workshoped their own papers with the first year writers, positioning the teacher candidates as authors rather than students. The narratives they wrote were about their students, their teaching, and their interactions with students. The first year writers, on the other hand, were asked to provide feedback rather than evaluating the teacher candidates' work. Despite this difference in roles, the teacher candidates seemed to experience the partnership as practice in responding to writing as an evaluative act. Thus if they are engaged with their writing – what the writing does for her – more thickly. The narratives were engaging and enjoyable. I tried to encourage them. I also tried to show them their work. The students were much better writers than I anticipated. I thought that they would have problems with structure, organization, etc. On the contrary, their writing was very natural. The main problem was grammar and run-on sentences. The narratives were engaging and enjoyable. I tried to encourage them. I also tried to show them their work. The students were much better writers than I anticipated. I thought that they would have problems with structure, organization, etc. On the contrary, their writing was very natural. The main problem was grammar and run-on sentences. The narratives were engaging and enjoyable. I tried to encourage them. I also tried to show them their work. 

As teacher candidates and their urgent concern to get "real-world experiences" in schools. The standards documents with which teacher candidates are becoming familiar (e.g., between teacher candidates and prison inmates), we speculate that school-based partnerships may be especially powerful for fostering such work as one of her primary goals as a teacher – ends up framing the writing experience, both in instruction and in response, as an experience (perhaps an aesthetic experience) in writing narrative rather than as an experience in identity formation or any of the other goals to which the student writer applies the act of composition. 

We, as a group of English educators, want to resist this temptation toward obsession with text quality, to which we know we are prone despite our best intentions. We are pushed to ask ourselves: Am I asking students to write things that have important points or to do important life work? Have I made the case for doing that work in the courses, in the classroom, and in the partnerships I design with beginning teachers I teach? Have I made my invitations to important in this way? 

Bonnie Sunstein has commented that partnerships can focus the writing efforts of achievement-centered teacher candidates more squarely on communicative purpose and on accomplishing something in the world besides winning them a good grade for a class, a language game which – at institutions like ours, anyway – they are quite adept at playing. Following Sunstein’s lead, we are experimenting with other partnerships across disparate groups (“unequal partners,” in her words), for example between teacher candidates and sixth graders. While we find value in building partnerships beyond schools (e.g., between teacher candidates and prison inmates), we speculate that school-based partnerships may be especially powerful for teacher candidates and their urgent concern to get "real-world experiences" in schools. We do recognize the many obstacles to framing writing in the way we suggest, especially in the context of teacher education. The standards documents with which teacher candidates are becoming familiar (e.g., the CCSS) treat forms of writing like narrative – as ends, rather than as tools to accomplish broader life purposes. Since writing is too rarely framed in this purpose-driven way in schools, it is – without a powerful intervening experience – difficult to persuade teacher candidates that doing important identity work is possible in secondary writing classrooms. Certainly powerful legacies and rationales sustain the ends-oriented way of thinking in writing instruction. However, I was reminded of a situation that most writers confront as they finish a first draft of a piece of writing: the "mantle of the expert" (Bolton and Heathcote) they deployed a good deal of evaluative language, much of it praise. For example, when one teacher candidate put it, “I’m very impressed by the level of writing. It is not only the structure, but the language and the style.” We found teacher candidates who sometimes reported finding a more authoritative, “expert” place to stand via the writing assignment in a teacher education course are centered on helping teacher candidates to get some of the “life work” of becoming a teacher done, and we make available to students a particular form (like narrative) which we imagine will be useful in getting that work done, we err if we then allow the focus to slip to the form of the text. As Mary and April noticed across many of the teacher candidates’ responses to the workshop. Another teacher candidate reflected:

Though they were not asked to evaluate their partners’ work but instead provide feedback, as teacher candidate donned the mantle of the expert (Bolton and Heathcote) they deployed a good deal of evaluative language, much of it praise. For example, when one teacher candidate put it, “I’m very impressed by the level of writing. It is not only the structure, but the language and the style.” We found teacher candidates who sometimes reported finding a more authoritative, “expert” place to stand via the writing assignment in a teacher education course are centered on helping teacher candidates to get some of the “life work” of becoming a teacher done, and we make available to students a particular form (like narrative) which we imagine will be useful in getting that work done, we err if we then allow the focus to slip to the form of the text. As Mary and April noticed across many of the teacher candidates’ responses to the workshop. Another teacher candidate reflected:

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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


Appendix A: Mary’s Narrative Assignment

English 400 Personal Narrative Assignment: “In the Moment”
“To see the world in a grain of sand, and heaven in a wildflower” – William Blake

Goals:
1. To write a personal narrative
2. To reflect on your process(es) as a writer and, more generally, on what has been called “the writing process”
3. To generate understandings of a) teaching the personal narrative and b) teaching (with) the “the writing process.”

Assignment:
Write an “In the Moment” narrative. In writing, place your readers into an intense moment you have experienced. Narrate the most dramatic, focused moment of your intense situation, 10 minutes or so. Matters to consider when drafting, writing, and revising include:

- “Art is selectivity. You cannot re-create every minute detail about anything, neither about an event nor about a person; therefore, that which you choose to include, or to omit, is significant—and you have to watch carefully the implications of what you say or omit” (Ayn Rand). Narrow your focus from the start. Select a story out of one, tiny, narrow corner of your life and avoid expanding on all the details around the story. Do not provide an introduction or an explanatory epilogue conclusion that explains what it is all about. Let the story speak for itself and trust your readers to make sense of your situation as described. Telling about a time when you had to make a quick decision, for example, can work very well. Or you may try telling about a life-and-death moment or a turning point in your life.

- Relate your experience in a way that begins to reveal its significance to you. In other words, don’t simply write about the event; show us how it affected you and why it was a significant experience. This is very tricky to pull off successfully. On the one hand, you don’t want to over-tell the story in such a way that gives your readers nothing to make sense of on their own. On the other hand, you don’t want to alienate your readers by confusing them with not enough information to comprehend your situation. And further still, you don’t want to simply state the facts of your situation without embedding some sort of context which lends meaning and depth to your situation.

- I recommend that you not choose to write an experience that is deeply distressing to you, such as the death of a loved one. In the past, I have found that many students struggle to craft such events into compelling narratives.

- Try to stick to using first or third person and experiment with dialogue as dialogue always brings your story into active, present tense which is enlivening for your readers. On a related note, successful dialogue on the page is not merely an accurate representation of what people say in real life; rather, it is often times pared down to, or reconstructed as, the most essential, well-stated utterances.

- Use concrete and specific detail to represent your point of view and your situation. Avoid direct explanation in favor of concrete details that show – rather than tell – the reader what you mean. Attach your ideas to visible things. Dramatize your situation so that your readers experience it as though it were happening before their eyes, so that the readers become an observer at the scene. This is different than telling or narrating in which you offer a synopsis, in effect telling the reader about something which has happened to you rather than letting the reader be a witness to the event.

- Eventually, if not before you begin writing than before you finish, decide what type of voice you will be adopting. Decide, for example, if you will sound young or wise or ironic or bitter, angry or energetic. By doing so, you are not only selecting tone, but attitude. Remember: you become a creator from the editor.

- As you undertake this writing, separate the creator from the editor. In drafting, work toward that high-velocity writing discussed by Murray writes, so you can stay ahead of that internal censor, who could very well keep you from exploring intriguing memories, ideas, characters, plot possibilities, dialogues, sentence structures, word choices, and so on.

- Once you have a fairly complete draft, however, do take a look at the mechanical aspects – spelling, sentence and paragraph construction, punctuation, diction.

- The final (for now) draft should be 1000-1500 words in length, posted to google docs and labeled “your last name_ ENG413_Narrative.” Do not include a cover page, but do include a title that reflects the piece as a whole or even adds something significantly new. On the date the draft is due (Feb 17), bring 3-4 hard copies to class to share with the
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 it telling change in this new setting of English 413 and the audiences you are writing for? How did the instructor’s prompt influence your choices as a narrator?
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

Rubric: 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)

End Notes
1. For more information about the course conceptualization and organization, see wra150023.wordpress.com
2. We did not have permission to video or audio record the conversations, so we rely on our notes.
3. 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 Authors
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