

Re-Valuing the Personal Narrative:  
Developing Metaphor and Critical Thinking in the  
Composition Classroom

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At UNC-Asheville, a reorganization of our general education courses three years ago led to our compressing two three-hour composition courses taught over two semesters into one four-hour course that also absorbed library research, which had formerly been a required one-hour course offered by our librarians. We titled our new course “Foundations of Academic Writing,” indicating that we see ourselves as one of the building blocks of the college experience. We see ourselves as the place in which our students begin to learn the ways of the academic discourse community. Unfortunately, and probably inevitably, in deference to both the time constraints and to the word “academic” in our title, we have gradually begun to de-value the personal narrative. In surveying the literature of composition studies, I have found that the dilemma we face of whether to trust the personal narrative enough to make room for it in academic writing is not limited to our department, but is also on the minds of many theoreticians.

Even pedagogy textbooks reflect this change. In his article, “Composition at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century,” Richard Fulkerson reports on a comparison he made between an early 1980’s textbook for graduate students in rhetoric with one published in 2001. In examining the changes he found in their contents, Fulkerson concludes that in the twenty-first century, not only have the “rhetorical aims and techniques [of those who prepare composition teachers] [. . .] changed,” but also that these changes show a “growing ‘scholarizing’ of the field” (657). The newer textbook, he contends, with its “heavy, scholarly bibliographical surveys,” chocked full of citations, reflects a shift in the way writing teachers view their goals (657).

The pressures that we feel in our department to de-emphasize the personal in favor of the “scholarly” parallel the developments that Fulkerson chronicles. The additional demands on our freshman composition course have nearly eliminated the time available for us to develop our students’ skills in writing the personal narrative. At UNC-Asheville, as at many English Language and Literature departments across the nation, the emphasis has shifted away from writing personal stories to mastering academic research and strategies for organization that fall within the conventionally accepted styles of university discourse.

I don’t mean to suggest that accounts of personal experience have disappeared completely. It’s not unusual, I think, for many of us to start our classes with a personal narrative assignment, believing that our

students are relatively comfortable telling their own stories. The more threatening world of research and documentation and complicated rhetorical patterns seems more palatable after our students have written an opening “easy” essay about some past incident in their lives. I think we often perceive, however, that the value of the personal narrative begins and ends there, and we quickly leave it behind in our rush on to the **really important stuff**: analysis and argument. We see telling stories as somehow just the preparation for **real** academics, the stuff that happens when we ask our students to maintain objectivity and consult scholarly sources. We encourage them to think logically and methodically as they search for Truth. We ask them to review sources, evaluate credentials, integrate quotations, quantify, qualify, and document. If we ever stopped to question whether or not we value the personal narrative beyond that first warm-up essay, I believe our goals and assignments would clearly answer NO. We do not trust personal narrative to do the work of academic discourse.

A compressed course that now must include teaching our students “information literacy” while improving their abilities in critical reading, critical thinking, effective organizing, elegant composing, **and** showing them how to avoid plagiarizing almost **has** to devalue the personal narrative. And in fact, we usually feel good about doing so. Experience as evidence is generally viewed skeptically in the university setting. In her book, *Personally Speaking: Experience as Evidence in*

*Academic Discourse*, Candace Spigelman points out that the personal narrative has long been seen as inappropriate to academic discourse. We are trained to look to libraries and databases for reliable evidence, not to ourselves.

As a result, a successful student often completes an assigned paper with which she feels little connection, a paper that may artfully support a thesis with a string of carefully chosen quotations and paraphrases, a paper that may even earn an A, but somehow for all its correctness has lost the personal connection, and seems to have touched neither the writer nor the reader.

UNCA’s composition program is perhaps unique in that while we have common objectives, each teacher chooses his/her own texts and course structure. In designing our new course, we collectively agreed on six shared goals, which we shaped to reflect the essentials of the previous course sequence as well as the new research requirements:

At the completion of our Language 120, we believe each student should: understand the value of writing as a tool of discovery, learning, and creative thinking; understand writing as a recursive process involving prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing; understand and respond to various communication situations, including voice, audience, purpose, developmental strategies, and language choices; recognize strengths and revise weaknesses in organization,

coherence, style, and structure; develop the ability to inquire, pose authentic questions, and write honestly and responsibly using relevant sources; Integrate material from secondary sources according to appropriate academic documentation conventions.

As we considered the form our new course should take, I found that some of my colleagues were eager to abandon the personal narrative and focus on more traditional impersonal academic writing. The goals we crafted, it was clear, could be achieved in a theme-and-thesis-driven, text-based course with which many of us are more comfortable and feel more qualified to teach than one that depends heavily on sometimes heartbreaking student stories. In a 2003 article in *College English*, Jane E. Hindman points out that scholars have historically referred to personal narrative as “self-indulgent at worst, irrelevant at best” (11). I think this attitude demonstrates an assumption that often encircles personal narrative writing: when we encourage our students to focus on themselves and their experiences, when we use student-generated texts as the heart of our compositions classes, students produce writing that is self-pitying, marginally interesting, and that offers no arguments or enlightenment to their audience.

When we began teaching the new course three years ago, I sized up our target and moved briskly into the scholarly academic mode. But almost from the beginning, I realized that something important was getting lost. I missed the personal narrative. I missed the

lively, accessible, personal student voice that had often emerged after weeks of coaching and practice in Language 101. And it turns out, I was not alone. Many scholars defend the use of the personal narrative in composition and other advanced writing courses, viewing it as critically important to student writers. They advocate using individual experience as means to develop not only voice, but an understanding of metaphor, synthesis, critical reflection and organization. These writers encourage composition teachers not only to use narrative as a first “warm up” assignment in freshman comp, but also to promote the use of story as a launching place and framework for scholarly inquiry. Robert Nash, for example, advocates the “Scholarly Personal Narrative,” in which the author explores some part of his/her personal life and weaves this experience into a fabric of scholarly research from other sources, as a way to reach insight into a larger problem. In this way the student’s personal experience can serve as both a metaphor for and a means of understanding a more universal situation. Nash advises student writers to “intentionally organize their essays around themes, issues, constructs, and concepts that carry larger, more universalizable meanings for readers” (30). He requires his students to find a way to make their personal stories support and illustrate the thesis statement of their essays. The personal narrative is not allowed to be merely self-indulgent storytelling. Scholarly personal writing emerges from the balance students find between their

personal concerns and the intellectual work that others have done on the same topic.

Using this approach, I asked my students who had been studying stereotyping to take a personal approach to crafting a persuasive essay on the topic. In response, my African American student Evan began his critical analysis of stereotypes with a personal story about being followed by police right into the driveway of his new house in a white neighborhood. Trailed and challenged repeatedly by different police officers, forced to show his door key to prove he belonged in his own driveway, Evan used description of his personal experience with racial stereotypes to lead into his analysis and establish his thesis:

Since their arrival in the United States, African American males have been categorized as lazy, unemployed, uneducated, mentally deficient, criminal, and violent. Many of these stereotypes have roots that reach back to slavery; others are more modern ideas. The police who followed me so closely were undoubtedly classifying me the way they had learned from movies, music, television, and newspapers. While the origins of African-American stereotypes are old, current media is responsible for keeping them alive and part of my personal experience.

Evan wove more personal experiences throughout the paper, combining them with research from the scholarly databases, and built a logical case that the perceptions he

encounters daily are often the result of persistent media stereotyping.

Another student who had lived eighteen years without personal experience of stereotypes and who had in class suggested that many people were overly sensitive to them, found his essay's genesis in a casual glance at a televised sports program:

There were two minutes left to go in the first half of the Illinois home basketball game. As I sat at my computer, I was not paying much attention to what was going on with the game. Time began to wind down, and the half time show began. I continued to work at my computer, glancing up occasionally to see the activity on the field, until a face caught my attention. The screen held a close up of an Illinois female student whose eyes were filled with tears. Illinois was not losing the game, so I wondered what had upset her so. I began to watch the program more closely in hopes of finding out. The camera finally zoomed off the girl and back onto the court, where the Illinois mascot was waving to the fans and dancing. It was then that the announcers enlightened me on what was going on. Because of recent rulings in collegiate spots, the Illinois mascot, Chief Illiniwek, had been banned from performing at all future games. He was making his farewell performance that day. As I stared at the television, I began to wonder what the NCAA was thinking. To me, it seemed like such an unfair thing to do to a university and

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its students. Clearly at least some of them were upset. I had heard criticism of sports stereotypes before, and knew that Indian mascots bothered some people. But there was Chief Illiniwek on the field, and I couldn't see anything wrong with having him there. To me he seemed strong and part of the school's history. I couldn't imagine the perspective of those who insisted on his being banned. I decided to do some research and write my paper about it. I found that although people not of Indian descent tend to see no problem with their schools being represented by tomahawk-shaking braves and chiefs in long feather headdresses, Native Americans object to their history being reduced to the violent image portrayed so often by school sports mascots.

Encouraged by the positive reception of this assignment, I began searching for other ways for students to integrate their stories into critical research papers, film reviews, persuasive essays, and explorations of abstract concepts. I realized that as students read and discussed the books, articles, and poems I assigned, they of course used their own experience as a way to understand them. I began to craft my writing assignments in a way that gave them permission to synthesize this experience into their academic writing – including permission to use the oft-forbidden pronoun, *I*. Synthesis is at the heart of academic writing, and by looking at the personal narrative as one part of research,

it was not difficult to write personal narrative into almost every writing assignment that had formerly been conceived of as objective and impersonal.

The good personal narrative assignment, as Donald Murray argues, will always insist that the students set their experience “in a larger context, trying on the patterns of meaning hidden within the experience” (519). Reflecting on their own lives to write a personal narrative gives students an opportunity they might not get elsewhere in the current efficiency-driven, bottom-line-conscious, check-off-the-credits university environment: the opportunity to see meaning in their own stories, and relate them to the world. A bonus was that we found that adding narrative to scholarly analysis made both writers and readers more interested.

A course that values the personal narrative provides an opportunity to plumb the depths of experience and try to make sense of it. I believe that the impulse to write personal narrative can be linked to a desire to impose order and meaning on life experiences that seem out of the control of the writer. I see that, on many levels, my students can benefit from writing personal narrative: many of them are assuming control of their lives for the first time; removed from the shelter of their families, they are exposed to strange new people and ideas. Many are experimenting with ways to be themselves and to understand themselves. What better time for writing the personal narrative? Encouraging the writing of personal narrative provides an opportunity for students to find the meaning in their lives, not only for themselves, but

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also for others. If we ask our students to write their experiences not merely to relate an anecdote, but to examine their stories critically, to reflect on reasons and consequences, and to extend their own personal story by researching other perspectives, we surely are teaching them academic discourse. And rather than forcing our students to write in the foreign jargon of the academy, perhaps we should be encouraging them to communicate in their own lively, passionate, and accessible voices. This can certainly be seen as academic writing.

Many composition scholars want to blur the distinction between academic and personal writing. In his essay "Twenty Years In: An Essay in Two Parts," Paul Heilker demonstrates how he gradually came to accept that the elements that he associated solely with the true exploratory essay – among them inner-directedness, subjectivity, innovation, experimentation, and uncertainty – and those that make up the thesis-driven expository article are not mutually exclusive. He suggests that many admirable texts are hybrid forms that show aspects of both structures. Heilker sees, as I do, a "continuum of possibilities" for combining the two genres (183).

Writing personal narrative invokes substantial critical thinking skills. Composing a personal narrative can help students understand analysis and argumentation. Jane Hindman emphasizes, in her appeal for what she calls an alternative discourse of "embodied scholarly rhetoric," that if the personal is to be accepted

as the scholarly, as she believe it deserves, it must do more than relate a story; it must be "concise, focused, and relevant" to an argument that the writer is crafting (10). A good personal narrative, in my opinion, must include a consciousness of the audience; it must be persuasive. It must be clear. Insisting that students explore a question or situation in their own lives that somehow intersects the readings is a reasonable way to involve personal narrative with research. For example, in a unit on obedience to authority, my students had read Erich Fromm's provocative statement that human disobedience, rather than being a bad thing, is actually good, and is responsible for our individuality. "Original sin," Fromm writes, "far from corrupting man, set him free" (378). Fromm goes on to in his article to differentiate between rational and irrational authority. After having read and discussed the complex article, I asked my students to take a stand on Fromm's idea and write an organized, documented academic paper in which they must support their position not only with evidence from fundamental research databases such as InfoTrac and LexisNexis, but also with evidence from their own lives. In this way the students could tell their own stories and test the theoretical against the concrete. It seems to me that when they craft logical arguments that include the evidence of their own lives, the student writers become more committed to the process and more invested in the outcome. In the resulting essays, students shared their conflicts with authority and were able to analyze the logic and consistency of their own situations

and other published incidents in light of the theories of a distinguished philosopher.

Candace Spigelman, in her book, *Personally Speaking*, encourages the conscious movement of personal narrative into the realm of academic discourse. Personal writing, she emphasizes, can do “serious academic work” (2). Blended genres are becoming more widely accepted, and, she asserts, this new approach “creates useful contradictions, contributes more complicated meaning, and so may provoke greater insights than reading or writing either experiential or academic modes separately” (Spigelman 3). She argues for a widespread acceptance of the “personal narrative argument,” recognizing that experience can function as valid evidence. This blended genre is, Spigelman asserts, “a logical and legitimate mode of argument” (8). Academic discourse explores issues, and the personal narrative can aid that exploration. As an example, one of my colleagues includes a Service Learning component in her composition class. After her students had interacted in the community on a regular basis -- for example, spending an hour in a nursing home once a week -- they were assigned to write a personal narrative about something significant that occurred in their work; after writing and revising this paper, they reviewed the literature in the field of their service and wrote a standard research paper on, for example, current problems in nursing homes. Finally, they were assigned to blend the two papers into a personal but scholarly paper the persuasive properties of which were

heightened by the intersection of experience and research.

Our challenge is to find room in a course already pressed with multiple expectations, to accept and make use of the personal narrative as a reliable source. As we continue to struggle with what to value and what to sacrifice, finding creative ways to combine the personal and the scholarly may provide us an opportunity to encourage the critical self- and other-reflection that can serve our students well in their personal as well as their academic lives.

One semester I wrote a creative non-fiction assignment in a course with a theme of “Writing about Ethics in the Real World” that I hoped would blur the personal and scholarly forms. To practice the “snapshot” essay form explained by Toby Fulwiler in his text *The Working Writer*, I assigned my students to write about a situation they had experienced that had some connection with making a moral choice. Because the form was unusual, students responded well; they liked writing in a new, more forgiving style, and I liked reading their responses. They were interesting and imaginative. In a later analytical paper, I encouraged many of them to use the same experience of moral dilemma as the root of a research project. That also worked well: My student Emily’s struggles with her drug-addicted brother precipitated and illustrated her study of treatment centers. Another student, Caitlyn, began her investigation of the dichotomy in feminist attitudes

toward pornography with a narrative account of a lengthy debate about the morality of porn that had erupted between friends in her dorm room. Sharing and reflecting on their personal experiences enlivened what might have been dull, objective papers. Their stories served as metaphors, providing meaning and insight beyond the surface for an audience larger than themselves. Now I am more likely than not to tell my students early in the semester that I would like them to try to find a way to include themselves in every assignment. I want them to understand that scholarship does not have to be remote, obscure and difficult to decode.

Although the personal is a good way to appeal to the reader, its impact goes far beyond the individual. A striking example of this is in Timothy B. Tyson's book, *Blood Done Sign My Name*. Beginning with his own recollection of words whispered to him by his childhood friend, the young son of a Klansman, Tyson frames history and shapes the material from seventeen pages of sources with his own personal story. In his book, the author discloses that he had originally written his saga of the civil rights struggles in a small North Carolina town in an objective academic style for his master's thesis. But he realized that without his personal narrative, the story lacked something vital:

In the entire thesis, all two hundred pages and more, the reader never learns that I lived in Oxford, that I knew many of the people in the story when I was a boy, or that my family was

marginally, though intensely, involved in these events. I was trying to write an objective history, grounded in scholarly research, and did not wish to undermine my empirical plodding in favor of anything more personally revealing. That approach has its place. [. . . ] As I have pondered the past more deeply, however, I have come to see that my master's thesis, despite its research and documentation, constitutes a species of lie; that in it, I failed to share my heart and my experiences with the reader, and hid behind my footnotes.

This [new] account bares not only my labors as a scholar but also my life as a human being. It explores what happened in Oxford, North Carolina, and what happened in my own soul. (Tyson 324)

Tyson's involvement, his own personal coming of age narrative, when combined with the more objectively researched story, became a metaphor for our larger national struggle to achieve a maturity that rejects injustice. He found that he could not tell one truthfully without telling the other. Addressing students at UNC-Asheville last spring, Tyson emphasized that his work is the creation of two sides of himself, of the storyteller and the historian, and that it is richer for the combination. By being both rigorous in his research and honest in his storytelling, his work has been able, he says, to "make the specific speak to the general human condition." He

described the blending of research with personal narrative as “serious intellectual endeavor.”

The importance of stories, as Nash, Spigelman, Hindman, Murray, Tyson, and many others emphasize, goes way beyond their telling. It’s only when we write our personal experience that we can begin to draw conclusions about what happened to us, to interpret, to generalize, and to predict. Richard Fulkerson points out that contemporary expressivist composition, which remains, he says, an “enduring category,” **insists** on the presence of the writer even in research-based writing. Even though personal accounts may not have traditionally been accepted as academic discourse, I believe we need to consider what may be gained from their inclusion and what is lost from their exclusion.

Telling stories is a valuable intellectual exercise. Telling stories is a sure-fire way to touch an audience; a strong personal voice can enliven any scholarly work. So, as composition teachers, I believe we should construct assignments that invite our students to tell personal stories that work in a variety of rhetorical forms. I believe we should continue to look for ways to give our students permission to tell their own stories, because the personal narrative **is** academic writing.

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