Using Learner Narratives to Foster Engagement and Community

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At the beginning of my third and fourth-year university courses, “Children’s Literature” and “English Studies in the Classroom,” I ask students to write autobiographical histories about their experiences with children’s literature or narratives about their learning experiences. As students struggle to integrate personal writing and academic discourse, they learn to make new connections among learning experiences in different courses, different disciplines, different schools, and between different parts of their lives—including their past and present, their public lives in school, and their private, emotional experiences. Like Richard Miller, who asks his teachers-in-training “to write in the entirely unfamiliar (perhaps nonexistent) genre of the institutional autobiography, a genre which unites the seemingly opposed worlds of the personal—where one is free, unique, and outside of history—and the institutional—where one is constrained, anonymous, and imprisoned by the accretion of past practices,” I find that this assignment avoids the artificial binary of assigning personal or critical writing, thus helping students “work within and against discursive constraints simultaneously” (“Arts of Complicity” 25-27). Asking students to write learner narratives, which make the familiar strange by being framed and re-contextualized for a shared cultural space, can increase student engagement, promote critical and creative thinking, and build a community of learners while also making room for rich and multiple stories.

As students become more conscious of the ways in which the rhetorical constraints of audience and genre shape their writing, their own written texts become more complex, nuanced, and dialogic. As they reflect on their learning histories, students struggle to negotiate tensions between an autobiographical self and “a socially constructed self,” who is, as Jane Hindman says, “constrained by the conventions of discourse” (89). They are also constrained, of course, by the conventions of the institutional context within which they are writing: there is no sense in trying to pretend that they are not writing for a class, a teacher, or a grade—trying to understand what is expected in a new blurred genre that is both academic and personal, self-disclosing and self-protecting. Therefore I try to make my expectations clear, while also giving the students questions that may, by sparking their imaginations, lead them to unexpected places. Hence I address the widespread taboo against the use of the personal “I” in academic writing at the outset. I have read too many student essays where writers all but dance on hot coals to avoid the incriminating “I,” substituting the awkward “one” and mixing it up with second-person or third-person plural pronouns, producing painful, laboured sentences such as “Experiences shape one in how they choose to teach.” Hearing that they are expected to bring the personal pronoun “I” into their
writing empowers some students, but disturbs others who have been taught that authority in
academic discourse depends on the elimination of give-away traces of subjectivity.¹

Yet there is a pay-off for those students who embrace the struggle to fold personal writing,
or what David Bartholomae names “students' primary discourse,” glossed as “what they might
write about [the topic] were they not in [...] or imagining that they were in my class, or any class”
(90), into disciplinary discourse. They discover for themselves the ways in which the conventions
around academic writing are governed by rhetorical constraints having to do with audience
expectations. As they explore ways to represent subjectivity in written discourse, and grapple with
the question of which identities to represent, students come to appreciate how malleable identities
are, and confirm Kurt Spellmeyer's assertion that “discourse communities are not monolithic”
(107). Students thus learn from the inside out that autobiographical narratives, and narrative
subjects, are rhetorically constructed.

Recognizing that Identities are Dynamic

Since writing a learner narrative involves consciously selecting and ordering some details while
excluding others, and strategically constructing a narrative subject, students may come to realize
that their learner identities are not rigid, but provisional, dynamic, and as open to revision as any
piece of writing. Those who have let their identities harden, labeling themselves as “C students” or
“not good at English,” can begin to recognize that self-identities are created, not foreordained. They
begin to appreciate how they are, in Paulo Friere's words, "unfinished, uncompleted beings in and
with a likewise unfinished reality” (197). As I re-read student narratives in the act of preparing this
paper, I found more to appreciate than I did the first time through, this time looking for ways that
students struggle with and negotiate the competing demands of this assignment, and how they
learn to speak authoritatively about personal experience within the context of an academic course
and discipline. Reading student autobiographical narratives also helps me better appreciate the
complexity and multiplicity of student identities, opening “possibilities for rethinking the labels [I]
so easily use to identify students” (McCarthey 230).

Furthermore, reflecting on how their learner identities have changed over time allows
students to rethink labels they have put upon themselves. In my English Education class, Natalina²
writes about how her learner identities have changed drastically over time; she remembers having
learned to construct a high school persona that would be socially acceptable to her friends:

I remember years ago, when summer was drawing to a close, and all
of my friends were lamenting the end of summer, I said something
along the lines of "School’s not so bad, I’m actually kind of looking
foward to going back." Of course, everyone looked at me like I was
crazy, and their bewilderment only increased as I tried to explain
that I actually missed the learning part of school. I quickly learned
what not to say aloud, and by the time I was in my senior year of high
school, I was good at playing the role of an uninterested C average

¹ Deborah Mutnick notes that leaving out the personal pronoun ‘I’ “achieves an effect of objectivity, omniscience,
and authority. Through the elimination of agency, statements assume a facticity, a presumption of truth, that more
subjective discourse self-consciously calls into question” (82).

² I have received signed permission forms from all students from whose work I have quoted. For those students who
have indicated they prefer anonymity, I have simply referred to “a student,” but have not used pseudonyms. I have
used names, as I do here, only for those students who prefer to be identified by their actual names.
Here Natalina shows her awareness that being a student, like being a teacher, is at least in part performative. From the distance of just a few years, Natalina can see how “playing the role of an uninterested C average student” in high school protected and confined her. Indeed, as a future educator who has reflected on her own adolescent performances, Natalina will be more likely to see beyond the posturing and bravado of the high school students with whom she will interact.

Acknowledging the socially constructed nature of the identities they choose to represent in written discourse allows students to more easily imagine different, and more flexible, role-identities. Kathleen Yancey suggests that having students write reflectively about their learning in a writing course may help them to construct not only more productive models of writing, but also self-identities as authors: she postulates that “In many ways a writing course is an exercise in identity formation, and growth in identity is one sign that the course is working” (143). Leaving aside the question of how one might assess growth in identity, I agree with Yancey’s premise that reflective writing may influence student self-identities; I would, however, change the emphasis from students’ “growth in identity” to their development of a larger, more elastic repertoire of identities facilitated through writing. I would posit that students who engage in dialogue with their former selves by writing learner narratives generate meaning through the acts of composing, narrating, and revising. Seeing various meanings emerge from the text of their own experiences, they are empowered by a conscious awareness that they are capable of change and agency in the world.

Bringing Affective and Cognitive Dimensions Together

Writing learner narratives helps students give voice to silenced parts of themselves—including their emotional lives—that are not usually given much space in academic institutions. Although it seems self-evident that learning will be affected by emotional states, school assignments rarely invite students to integrate critical and cognitive skills with their affective experiences; many teachers of writing emphasize an exclusive rationality that shrinks from an “emotional contamination” that is inevitably linked to the feminine and domestic realm (Spigelman 18). Since readers will rightly resist being drawn into affectively charged and potentially manipulative experiences, teachers need to acknowledge when apprehension about the use of affective material that makes too many demands on reader sympathy, or that exploits emotion for its own sake, may be justified. However, as we know from rhetorical theory, emotional appeals, when used appropriately, may greatly strengthen rational and ethical appeals in argument. As Megan Boler suggests, it is even possible that emotions may function as a site of critical inquiry, especially in education, where values and priorities are informed by emotion (xviii).

Future educators who reflect in writing on their lives in school will be more conscious of their emotional power over students. Reflecting on the way her grief over her grandfather’s death robbed her of enthusiasm and motivation in elementary school, Tara, a fourth-year student going into teaching, describes how a teacher who saw her struggle and took the time to help her influenced her view of the kind of educator she hopes to become:

I have come to realize that a student’s personal life must be taken into account if a drastic change in their learning occurs. After a traumatic or stressful event, a student’s willingness to learn may be blocked because their attention is focused somewhere else. I realize,
as my teacher did, that learning can be affected by changes in life and I hope to be as compassionate and concerned as she was for me.

Invited to re-visit her learning narrative toward the end of our class and engage in dialogue with it, Tara's self-realization deepened. She glossed her own narrative as follows:

Upon reading this in class, I realized how much I was impacted by my grandfather's death because I began crying. Even ten years after his death I am still emotionally affected. This shows how much emotions can affect a person, especially a child who cannot understand or control their emotions. I want to be tuned in to how my students are feeling and be emotionally available to them because they may not have anyone else to rely on.

Here it is not only the writing, but also the reading of it, that evokes Tara's deeply felt response to her grandfather's death ten years earlier; as Richard Miller suggests, one way to think about writing is to consider visceral responses during "the moment of production" ("Nervous System" 272). Tara is not exploiting her grief, but uncovering it as she writes from a safe distance of relative maturity; more important for a writer, she is able to find value and significance in it as she formulates her own teaching philosophy.

In writing learner narratives, students must practice creative as well as critical thinking as they decide which details to include and develop, which details to leave out and, especially, where to leave off. Educational theorist Kieran Egan points out that stories engage us affectively, in part, because they end. The pattern we find, the place of wrapping up, entails making a choice. When students write personal narratives about something ongoing and fluid—that is, their learning identities—they must also find a way to end. Negotiating the tension between having to find an end and knowing that it is arbitrary opens students to an awareness of uncertainty that Kurt Spellmeyer, drawing on Foucault, describes as necessary for the "knower to discover the possibilities for 'freedom' within a game of truth" (71). Realizing that the pattern uncovered involves a creative yet arbitrary choice frees students to realize that meaning and identities are not fixed.

For example, a male student in my Children's Literature class wrote how he had detested reading as a child, since it took away time from sporting activities. He recounted that he also associated reading and writing with his mother and sister. For him, reading seemed to be on the opposite spectrum of sports. Sports were active and competitive, whereas reading was something one did alone....Reading novels for English class took time out of other activities that I enjoyed, and my grades in English demonstrated my hatred for the subject. When other kids were affected by such classics as the *Hardy Boys*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and other creative and important aspects of youth culture, I neglected them.

Reflecting on the different meanings that reading literature now has for him, this student reveals his awareness that, as Spellmeyer puts it, "the subject always speaks from a 'discontinuity'—from a point of intersection between divergent interests, channels, and communities" (76). Those who have previously defined themselves as non-readers may find it particularly useful to re-visit their memories of reading, especially at the beginning of a literature class; by making explicit their old assumptions about literacy practices, and allowing themselves to question their attachment to those assumptions, they can make room for new self-constructions as readers.
Of course, not all learner narratives lead to a triumphal conclusion of difficulties defeated, but student reflection on the origins and persistence of learning habits that have become entrenched over time allows for the possibility of questioning the ongoing usefulness of such habits. In my English Education class, one student described how she was intensely mortified when asked to sing in front of her class; her response was to gradually become more and more withdrawn and silent around friends and classmates. The student describes how her shyness was later reinforced:

When I was in grade nine I had to do an oral book report and the experience hindered my ability to speak in front of a class. When it was my turn to present I totally blanked out and forgot what I was going to say. Eventually I was able to pick up where I left off, but the feelings of failure completely overwhelmed me. As a result of my mistakes during my book report, every single presentation that I have done since then I have always written out my entire presentation for fear of forgetting my thoughts due to my nervousness.

Later, when the student did have to present in our small seminar, she still gripped her notes tightly, but at least I was able to talk to her gently about how she might be able to let go of this habit now that she was getting ready to become a teacher herself. By writing a narrative about her experiences with oral presentations, this student has begun to relegate these experiences to the historical past, making way for more open-ended narratives in the present and future. Although students often feel anxious about what Batholomae calls their “right to speak” (92) even when they are addressing their own experiences, I remind them that they are necessarily crafting narratives, choosing what to include, what to leave out, what to develop, and what to mention briefly. Turning raw experience into a “text” requires a leap of faith—and courage.

Learner Narratives as Critical Work

In recent years, composition theorists have contemplated the value of the personal story and essay for writing classes less as the uncovering of one true “authentic” voice, and more as a site for the kinds of transformation associated with critical pedagogy. As Rachelle Harris argues in her discussion of the interconnections among critical pedagogy, rhetoric, and non-fiction personal writing, “Critical work is personal, reaching out to the experiences and ideas that enable and constrain individual lives; this carries over into writing classrooms and student texts, the rhetorical spaces in which students and teachers negotiate meaning, content, and form” (405-6). This transformation, which may be facilitated by students’ insight into their own experiences rather than imposed on them by daunting calls to overthrow the system into which they are trying to fit, takes place in a quiet, subtle way. Students recognize that questions and critiques of schooling must be couched in ways an educator will find persuasive. They are conscious that they are fulfilling an assignment situated in the institution; they do not, of course, forget the power of the grade, or the power relations between professor and students. Nevertheless, learner narratives, perhaps even more than other kinds of personal writing students do in writing classes, may be “implicitly and explicitly critical of mainstream educational and social institutions” (Mutnick 80).

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3 As Richard Miller points out, students do not “forget where they are, no matter where they are, no matter how carefully we arrange the desks in the classroom, how casually we dress, how open we are to disagreement, how politely we respond to their journal entries, their papers, their portfolios” (“Arts of Complicity” 18).
Crossing the personal with the public, threading together experiences from diverse sites, textual as well as experiential, student writers must struggle to articulate a relationship with their own experience which has public value. The many small, complex decisions about what will be considered significant from the perspective of the course and the discipline puts them in what Bartholomae refers to as “a questioning relationship to the culture that’s given [them its] forms and assumptions” (267). Writing for a course and a professor within the discipline, they must find a way to stand outside it, positioned at the locus of private and public discourses.

Even if a writer is not ostensibly questioning or critical, the blurred genre of the reflective narrative forms implicit questions. As students struggle with questions about what and how to represent their experiences with literacy, with learning, or with a particular academic subject, students may come to realize that, just as their particular piece of writing is a mutable construction, so is any piece of writing—including non-fiction. I would argue, in fact, that writing about their own experiences requires students to “read” their memories in a way that prepares them to read the more sophisticated texts of others. Rather than beginning a class by looking at the polished, apparently seamless writing of professional authors—next to which their own expressions of experience pale into insignificance—beginning with the text of their own experiences moves students directly into the work of questioning, shaping, and revising according to what they imagine to be the interests and values of the community for which they are writing, an imagined community that becomes real through the act of sharing narratives.

Students who write learner narratives may come to reflect on the gap between the democratic mission of educational institutions and practices that often oppress real life students, reinforcing social and cultural stratifications of race, class, gender, abilities, and intelligence. One strongly motivated student named Emily wrote about the way in which literacy and social status were married forever in her early schooling:

Our class was divided into three groups; the Eagles, the Robins and the Crows. To be an Eagle meant that you were an advanced reader and thus one of the smart kids in class. The Robins were the average kids and the Crows were the dummies. Today I do not think of the crows as dummies but back then that is how we kids saw it. I was one of the elite members of the Eagles reading groups. I was one of the smart ones until one day, when I was doing some one-on-one reading with my teacher, she said that she was going to put me in the Robins group. I was being demoted. It was devastating. I do not remember much from the first grade but I remember trying to hold back my tears when I had to move my desk to the row where the Robins were away from my best friend who was an Eagle.

Writing the learner narrative gives Emily the opportunity to re-visit a painful moment from elementary school and to recognize the way her more adult perspective on childhood social stratification differs from her earlier assessment of the “crows as dummies.” By writing about her mortification when the teacher demoted her to a lower-level reading group, she also brings to awareness the ways in which this kind of grouping based on reading proficiency creates harmful labels of people that stick; it is interesting that the word “crows” appears in lower case the second time she uses it, while Robins and Eagles stand relatively proudly in capital letters. By reflecting on her earlier thinking, Emily’s personal experience becomes emblematic of a larger socio-cultural problem of labeling and stratification; she is learning, as Ann Berthoff puts it, “to problematize the situation” through “the generative powers of language” (123) by examining and reexamining the significance of her schooling experience.
Exploring their own learning experiences in writing helps diminish the likelihood that future teachers will perpetuate the sort of practices that lead students to see school performance, especially in areas associated with reading and writing, as a measure of personal worth. A second-generation Indo-Canadian male student with no accent describes the stigma of being mis-labeled and put into a fourth-grade ESL class at a new school:

For nearly eight months I was in ESL for part of the day, learning concepts and ideas that I had a full grasp of while my other classmates were writing in journals. The ESL program eventually realized that I did not belong there, but when I rejoined my classmates, I realized I had not developed the writing skills the other children had. I began to think of myself as slow and did not put much effort into my English classes.

In writing learner narratives, students may call attention to inequalities from their own experiences which they—and we—have not been trained to recognize or articulate. Using instead what Yancey calls “their native language...a product of the multiple discourses in which they participate” (56) helps students begin to de-mystify academic constructions of knowledge. It is my contention that students who have found the writerly authority to question and critique their own experiences will be less likely to “fall silent” before the privileged texts and academic authorities they encounter, that they will be one step closer to being able “to insert themselves into the discourse of the discipline” (Bartholomae 130-34), especially when peers and a teacher, who represents the authority of the academy, attend to their narratives with respect.

Revisiting and Revising Old Assumptions

As students become authors and revisers of their own narratives they will develop more confidence and authority as writers by deciding for themselves how to use language “to think about their thinking and interpret their interpretations” (Berthoff 124), what counts as evidence, how to present and represent it, how they might draw out the implications of what they have said, and how they might modify or qualify their implications and conclusions. They also have a chance to measure their progress. In the passage below, one student writes about how her assumptions about learning gradually changed in a way she could not have foretold:

In grade twelve I was required to be a peer tutor to satisfy some sort of “life experience” qualification in order to graduate. The fact that this set-up was a requirement reveals a lot about my interest in tutoring; there wasn't any. My match was a grade ten student whose English was shaky to say the least and whose writing (although mine was nothing to brag about) was barely comprehensible. While she was with me (and I with her), I had to help her through Macbeth. This was a problem for me because not only did I not remember a thing about the play, as it had been two years since last I even thought about it, but when I did have to study it I didn't like it and could hardly understand it. I wondered why the school administration would have me help this girl. It seemed like a waste of time and that I should be doing something worthwhile - like learning Macbeth for myself! This also fed a belief that I had concerning ESL students. I did not believe that the government
should be responsible for teaching ESL and there I was doing it myself!
Eventually I realized that this situation could not have been one-sided; they would not have me do this only for the sake of the girl because they had numerous ESL teachers at the school. Then I realized that through walking the girl through Macbeth I had also come to understand it better than before. I also realized that I had way better inter-personal skills than I ever thought. My politics about ESL did not dramatically change but it certainly gave me some insight into what it’s like to not speak the language of your country. She passed grade ten English and I was proud of myself.

As students write about aspects of their experience that had previously been overlooked—the unremarkable background of their lives—they begin to see how attention, or singling out, in Friere’s words, can bring forth "elements from their 'background awarenesses'" to reflect upon (372). Just as the assigning of significance to parts of texts can cause passages “that were silent to suddenly speak” (Bartholomae 93), the uncovering of significance in one’s lived experience through narration can help students toward greater courage and authority as writers. As the student above reflected on her own experience in tutoring an ESL student, she began to examine problems with her once-dismissive view of ESL students, whom she categorized as Other, and gain appreciation for the ESL student’s struggles. Through writing about this experience, she also began to see herself as a reader and even an interpreter of Macbeth, and developed a deeper understanding of the text through her role as tutor. This recognition of a self-image capable of change is achieved in the act of articulation. Students who reflect on an earlier self from a critical and questioning vantage point have begun to imagine the position of privilege that is a necessary first step, according to Bartholomae, in “defining rhetorically or stylistically a position from which to speak” (79).

These students are also involved in an interpretive hermeneutics. As they struggle to reinterpret their experiences and find a shape for their narrative, they begin to realize that their own learner identities are shifting, multiple, and “at least in part culturally situated, mediated, and constructed” (McCarthey 231). Writing about their own learning histories helps students to situate themselves in an academic discipline, open to dialogue with themselves, with each other, with the texts they are crafting, reading, and re-reading.

**Representing, not just Remembering**

It is important to remind students that it does not matter whether they can remember exact details about a scene, or even whether what they recount is factually accurate. As Canadian writer Dennis Sumara suggests, in the representation of identities in autobiographical writing, what actually happened is less important than how we remember and interpret our experiences. The way we think about ourselves may be influenced by “identifications with fictional characters” or even by fibs we have told “which have become incorporated into the way [we] identify” ourselves (59). Our identities are also formed by what others remember and recount. In my Children’s Literature class, for example, one student found that doing a bit of “research,” such as talking to a parent or sibling, or looking at a bookshelf at home, resulted in a conscious decision not to re-read childhood favorites; as the student explains,

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4 In a similar vein, Donald Murray writes, “I do not know where what I know comes from. Was it dreamt, read, overheard, imagined, experienced in life or at the writing desk?” (213).
To help me write this memoir, I actually went down into my crawlspace with a flashlight and looked through all the boxes of my old books. I was down there for almost an hour reading through, smiling and laughing at all the titles I used to love so much. Now, after listening to comments made by my classmates, I have no desire to read them again. So many people made comments in class about how re-reading books that they used to love as children was completely different: books that used to seem so special and enchanting when we were younger now seem so ridiculous and simple. I can honestly say I don't want to change the memory I have of how amazing Roald Dahl's *Matilda* or *The BFG* was!

Bringing in her own experience, this student's writing belongs to a genre of personal academic writing that Hindman might call “embodied writing” (14), located in the material world of the crawlspace, involving laughter and other beings. In this narrative, the student goes on to comment on how certain books are not simply part of a personal repertoire and bridge to the past, but may also create or strengthen a trans-generational bond:

Just recently, I went on the internet and got an Ebay account, and the first things I bought were the Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle books, which were my favorite when I was young, and the Carbonel King of Cats books, which were my mother's absolute favorite when she was young, and which she always wished she had. They are really old books about a magical cat that talks, and I think the last book in the series now costs about five hundred dollars! But I gave my mother the first three (which I hunted down from Britain and China) for a Christmas present and she was so overwhelmed when she opened it that she started to cry. Taking this course now puts it all into perspective for me: going down to the crawlspace to look at my old books aroused the same sort of feelings. Every single title has a memory, either of the story itself, where I read it, or something in it that I remember I could relate to.

This narrative encompasses the material circumstances of others besides the narrator: the classmates talking about books, the mother with her tears, even the Ebay community, where book nostalgia translates into economic as well as cultural capital. It is also easy to see the realization this student is coming to: her reading practices have been formed through dialogue with others; as a reader, she has a lineage— influences from her family and teachers that have shaped her.

**Making Use of Resistance**

Of course, we need to be sensitive to some students' reluctance to mine their private experiences as an investigative resource, especially when there is the possibility that writing about personal

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5 Embodied writing, which William Banks carefully distinguishes from the expressivist writing promoted in the 70s and 80s, “asks writers to foreground their sense of self at the same time that they consider the social implications of this gesture away from ‘impersonal,’ disengaged, disembodied rhetorics that permeate certain masculinist logics” (35)
experiences may violate cultural taboos. We can give alternative assignments to those who seem uncomfortable writing personal narratives, or negotiate modifications to the assignment for those students who, as Ann Murphy rightly points out, feel intruded upon when asked to do personal writing. I would, however, challenge her claim that we “cannot directly use resistance and defense mechanisms to aid our work” (187). On the contrary, I would argue that, while we do want to respect students’ privacy, we can also view some forms of resistance, whether directed toward educators or the institution itself, as a form of healthy questioning with constructive potential. However, teachers are usually frustrated by student resistance, defined as “those games or strategies, ranging from fun to deadly serious, played by those with little or no power against those with power” (Daniell and Young 183). Yet resistance has value in and of itself; as Megan Boler points out, students often express early political resistance as skepticism toward the media and classroom authorities (146-48). Resisting an assignment or the authority represented in the classroom may be a way for students to tilt the asymmetrical power relations at school toward equality. Even as they write learner narratives, students have a place to put their legitimate frustrations with school and be heard by a representative of the educational system.

While my primarily working-class students usually profess that they want university education, they are typically ambivalent about the process of acquiring cultural capital in higher education, especially if they are the first generation in their family to go to college. Writing narratives about school-based learning can help bridge what Gerald Graff calls the “academic language gap” by making room for “the deep ambivalence students often feel toward intellectual culture as such” (140). Learner narratives are contained pieces of writing related to school that actively encourage students to confront their resistance to learning, their anxieties and discomforts as well as their successes in learning.

As students hold their experiences up to the light of reflection and analysis, they can tilt them in a way that reveals new insight and possibilities. Consider, for example, how one student in my English Studies class, who had an unusual experience being raised in a Christian cult called “The Family,” describes re-appropriating experiences of being forced to memorize Bible passages in a way that, ironically, have come to serve her as an independent thinker:

Interestingly enough, my new-found ability to question and think critically about religious texts has brought me back to the Bible, and enabled me to see the verses that were used to control us in a new light. When the Bible states “And ye shall show the truth and the truth shall set you free,” I no longer take that to imply that there is one truth and that it is one that confirms Christianity’s monopoly on holiness, salvation or goodness. The truth that has set me free has been the knowledge that such terms as “truth” are relative and defined differently by different people, cultures, religions; there are many different truths out there and this knowledge has set me free to discover my own truth. In The Family, however, I didn’t have the tools as a learner to recognize this; only since my development as a learner in college have I been able to apply such things.

Constructing Scholar Identities

Reading, listening, and responding to each other’s texts in peer workshops helps to de-mystify the process of writing and editing as students begin to develop a sense of themselves not only as writers with something to say, but also as critics, scholars, and editors with something to contribute. In my classroom, I have students bring in typed versions of their learner narratives and
take turns reading them aloud in small groups of three or four. The practice of reading aloud helps them identify areas that sound awkward or undeveloped; in addition, there is often cross-fertilization among students as one student’s story or idea sparks another’s memory or imagination. The peer workshop validates students as writers when they hear their own voices speaking to a respectful audience, and students who find themselves floundering with the assignment are inspired by hearing others’ narratives. Having other students as the first audience for their learner narratives also helps free students from the pressure to please the teacher by meeting expectations. Teachers who are aware of their own biases and predilections will be more genuinely receptive and accepting of what students choose to explore. In addition, sharing narratives in this way lays the foundation for community as students go beyond two-party dialogues with the teacher or even with themselves and begin to build a classroom community that is more collaborative, intersubjective, and democratic.

Learner narratives, like any kind of personal essay, allow students to represent a self positioned at a critical distance from experience while still being connected to feelings, to the body, and perhaps even to spirit. In learner narratives, students do, however, begin to identify themselves as learners—even if reluctant learners—of our discipline, rather than being forced to mimic the disciplinary discourse. In writing a narrative, a student can position herself in a liminal place, between private and public realms. Since writing is dynamic and potentially transformative, it helps students to inhabit stronger subject positions from which they can experience their identities as writers or students of the discipline. In my Children’s Literature course, for example, as students reflect on their changing relationship with the genre, they develop an expanded understanding, from the inside out, of how Children’s Literature includes not only canonical classics such as Alice in Wonderland, Wind in the Willows, Charlotte’s Web, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, but also picture books, oral story-telling, Disney movies and other children’s fare from popular culture, even toys and electronic games. Students also commonly become more conscious of how their values concerning what is worth reading have changed. Perhaps they realize that literacy is strongly mediated by social relations, and that the only pleasurable reading they recall is outside of school. One student writes about his surprise in discovering, as he worked through a series of books, that his fascination with a particular book was influenced by emotional and family associations he had entirely forgotten:

I began to feel a sense of familiarity. The story was not one I knew intimately, but I still felt familiar with bits and pieces of it. It was not until the fourth book in the series that I came upon a scene that made me realize that I had read these books before. I later found out that my parents had bought the series on cassette tape, and we would listen to them whenever we went on long trips. It was funny, though, not remembering any of these instances, and no real plots or significant events from any of the books. What I did remember, however, were the mental images that I drew when I was a child. I remembered the larger than life cartoonish image I had of Eustace becoming a dragon, and the great and terrible notion of Aslan the lion. It was truly enjoyable reconciling the snippets of my childlike imagination and memory with a more mature understanding of the books.

This student stumbles upon the ways in which reading children’s literature as an adult involves a double perspective that will help him to read the texts in our class in a more nuanced way.
Finding Narrative Authority

In the process of writing their learner narratives, students find significance in memories or events that at the time may have seemed unremarkable. As they come to realize that writing, and learning, is a matter of attention, selection, focus, and arrangement, they develop more sense of agency as learners. Whether they are English students or not, they know the shape of stories from diverse literacy experiences. They usually struggle to craft a learner narrative that has a dramatic shape, with anticipatory tension leading up to a climax of sorts, and fulfillment of expectation or resolution. Having students write learner narratives sets a theme of inquiry and a tone of respectful curiosity in the classroom from the outset. As they come to realize that learning is open-ended, students are more likely to develop textual authority as they also realize that they are capable of educational insight. Erin, a student in my English Education class, shows textual authority even as she writes about anxiety evoked by recognizing that her learner and teacher identities are contingent, fluid, and open to revision:

> I believe that one of my limitations as a student is that I often feel like I do not know as much as I should for a fourth year student. Occasionally I feel like eventually somebody is going to find out that I really do not know as much as I should. This is a limitation to both learning and teaching. With learning, I can never be satisfied with what I know and always feel inadequate. It can also be a strength to learning because I will continue learning because I am never satisfied with what I know. For teaching, thinking that I do not know enough is a limitation because it makes me nervous to go into a classroom and be exposed as a fraud. After reading *A Life in School* by Jane Tompkins, I realize that many teachers and students feel the same way. It is comforting to find that I am not alone.

Erin begins by talking about the state of not-knowing as a limitation, then recognizes that not-knowing, at least as a student, is also a strength. Though not-knowing as a teacher is still a frightening and remote prospect for this fourth-year student, she has come to recognize that she is not alone in this fear; I speculate that she will one day also come to see not-knowing as a teacher as a potential strength that prevents complacency and allows her to be curious in an ongoing way. Not-knowing produces the kind of anxiety, or “nervous states” that may well indicate, according to Richard Miller, “learning is under way” (“Politics” 50).

Writing Learner Narratives Builds Community

The learner narrative assignment is such an interesting and fruitful exercise in meaning-making and community-building that it can be used in a variety of courses at different levels. When combined with a peer review workshop, where students read their narratives aloud in small groups of three or four, the learner narrative assignment opens up room for difference while building community. Listening to other narratives usually sparks new ideas, so students can take their narratives home, revise them, and then submit them. Even though the material in the learner narrative is personal, it is focused on learning experiences related to school, and students gain a measure of objectivity from reading the piece aloud and then revising it. There is no pressure to have a certain kind of story: a traumatic confession, triumphal hero narrative, or narrative of the marginalized or abject other. Nevertheless, the vulnerability that students experience while writing, and especially while reading their narratives out loud to other students in small groups,
helps foster a climate of respect. While engaged in the process of writing in this blurred genre, students will likely end up interacting more, as they did in my English Education seminar: “We’re talking about this outside of class and e-mailing each other a lot,” reported one student. Sharing their narratives helps to counter the cultural and institutional alienation many students feel in school, and promotes cross-fertilization so the construction of knowledge becomes an explicitly collective endeavor.

Attention to students as whole beings, including their emotional lives, does not need to drown the intellect or overwhelm critical and analytic faculties. On the contrary, it can release creative energy that is commonly held back. As educational theorist Kieran Egan points out in a discussion of the imaginative dimension of learning, stories bring together the affective and the cognitive in a holistic way: “As we hear melody and harmony as one—though we can separate them in analysis—so we make sense of the world and experience in a unitary way—regardless of what distinctions we might make for research purposes” (269). Engaging in the complex task of writing autobiographical and learner narratives helps students at the beginning of a course recognize the multiple challenges—and pleasures—of forming a meaningful structure from the unfiltered chaos of their experience—indeed, from any raw data. Critical thinking is not divorced from creative thinking: in a vivid metaphor, Ann Berthoff urges us to “stop designing courses in which expository prose is the meat and potatoes and expressive writing is Dream Whip” (80). Narratives and stories provide patterns for our thinking and learning, and have the potential to draw us into a larger community. As educators, we would be wise to attend to the often untapped resource of stories and narratives—including our own—as well as the stories our students carry into the classroom.

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**Works Cited**


