

Writing from Memory

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[Introduction]

I recently became interested in the genre of memoir. I am systematically—or sometimes not so systematically—reading my way through memoirs of various kinds as well as researching the use of memory in writing. I plan to develop this into a more formal research project and today's presentation represents the formal beginning of that project.

[Content]

For the past several semesters my English 111 (College Composition I) class has had as its first formal paper a literacy narrative, that is, a memoir paper for which the topic is a meaningful reading and/or writing experience. After some experimentation, I settled the length to be a minimum of 1000 words, with a range of 1000-1250 words,

which gives students room to develop an idea in some depth but does not become unwieldy.

I first used this assignment for the *excellent* pedagogical reason that I had just been hired here, had three sections of English 111 to prep in just a few days, and the textbook and ancillaries had a literacy narrative assignment all mapped out.

Also, I thought that having a first paper that allowed students to write about themselves and their own experiences could reduce some of their anxiety about writing in a college English class.

Further, the specific choice of a *literacy* memoir would focus students on the activities of reading and writing—two key activities and course objectives in English 111.

Finally, because it was a formal essay, we could incorporate the basics of MLA document format, a simple but foundational step in formal writing in English.

So, the topic was to be a personally significant reading and/or writing experience.

A suggested writing strategy was to incorporate other “characters,” such as family, teachers, librarians, or other people who had contributed in a meaningful way to the literacy experience.

Aside from the controlled topic choice, it seemed to be a flexible, personal, and creative—creative, at least, for a college essay--assignment.

Still, confronted with this assignment, quite a number of students raised concerns. Many English 111 students were young—some were still high school seniors in dual enrollment classes: “I’m still a kid. I haven’t had any experience with reading and writing!” (I’m not sure what that says about what they thought they’d been doing up until then in K-12 . . .)

Some were put off by the textbook examples, which tended to be about stories of success in school. “I didn’t have the kind of childhood where anybody read to me,” some said, or “I wasn’t ever a good student.”

It seemed that some students felt that their memoir had to fit someone else’s mold in order to be “correct” for this college paper assignment.

This was troubling.

And some colleagues voiced reservations about the value of personal narratives in English 111. What could students learn about writing for college from writing about themselves? And weren't we just playing into their already well over-developed sense of "It's all about me"?

If so, students weren't alone. Memoir, autobiography, and other forms of "writing about me" are a pervasive and profitable segment of publishing.

Ben Yagoda has written a book entitled, *Memoir: A History*, tracing the genre from its precursor forms (such as commentaries by Julius Caesar to what is thought by some to have been the first autobiography, *Confessions*, by Saint Augustine, through the spiritual commentaries and autobiographies of Medieval and Renaissance popes. Indeed, he notes, "The development of glass mirrors at the end of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth centuries has been cited as a key factor in the Renaissance emphasis on the self; mirrors certainly made possible the newly popular genre of the artist's self-portrait, a form of visual autobiography" (36).

Religious autobiography and autobiographies of military and political leaders held sway for some time. The expectation was that the life stories of important personages could memorialize their experiences and inspire future generations.

And even with the attendant issues of memory not being accurate (it usually isn't) and the corollary of exaggerating what "really" happened, these works continue to be viewed as valuable documents.

The ubiquity of memoir today demonstrates its shift from what might have been seen as "the stories of the grand" to the stories of the more ordinary or the notorious. Yagoda writes that "narratives by criminals, in particular" were popular in the early nineteenth century (76). And if P.T. Barnum can be considered a celebrity, then his 1854 book, *The Life of P.T. Barnum, Written by Himself* (121), can be considered an early example of celebrity autobiography.

With higher rates of literacy as the nineteenth century progressed, widely available inexpensive publication methods, and the very human desire to know all the details about other people's lives, memoir in the twentieth century grew to encompass diverse

narratives, including, to name but a few, works by African-Americans such as Malcolm X, Maya Angelou, and Richard Wright; Holocaust memoirs by Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi, and Viktor Frankl, right up through recent bestselling titles such as *Angela's Ashes* and *Eat, Pray, Love*.

If we readers once used to turn to fiction or poetry as a way of understanding the world, we may instead now be turning to memoir, autobiography, and other non-fiction genres—recognizing, of course, the elasticity of the term “non-fiction.”

Given the prevalence of this genre, our students are surrounded by the personal memory narrative. They need not be avid readers or readers of canonical literature to be conversant with this genre. So if we are asking them to participate in the discourse community of the memoir, we can reasonably expect that they are already at least somewhat conversant in it.

Yet, in asking students to write a literacy narrative, are we taking them off task from what they should be doing in college writing? Should I be working more to bring students into an academic

discourse community a la Donald Bartholomae, or should I see them first as writers and second as academics, a la Peter Elbow?

Professor Caroline Porter argues that “writ[ing a] memoir assignment for a first assignment . . . will let [students] know that their life story, no matter if it is vastly different from their peers—has a place in the classroom.”

“Furthermore,” she adds, “it allows the teacher to gain a sense of what his or her students are like, [so that] they can tailor the lessons to actual students.”

And she notes that “[A]s my research has pointed out over and over—students are more engaged when writing about their own lives than they are writing academic papers. This eases them into the academic genres gently” (“Memoir and Autobiography”).

Having come as we all have through the ranks of college and graduate schools, we recognize all too well that most of our students are not yet members of the academic discourse community, and we know that some have no plans to be there.

But, like Porter, my own experience with the quality of student writing on the literacy narratives has been positive.

Students have tended to write well for this assignment, even those who saw the word “memoir,” but then ignored the “literacy narrative” topic, wrote moving and sometimes heart-wrenching essays about the death of a young relative, their own traumatic war experience, the tragic loss of a loved one to addiction or violence, or their own or a loved one’s triumph over an illness or disability.

Indeed, one reason I have kept the literacy narrative as the paper’s focus rather than using a broader topic is that I could not withstand the emotional effects of reading these stories.

But what about those students I mentioned earlier, the ones who said they had no literacy narrative to tell?

Well, with a bit more digging I learned that, even those students who don’t think they “qualify” to write on this topic find that they do, in fact, have experiences that they can contribute.

For example, students who have come from other countries and learned to read and write English as a second language have that to draw on.

Students whose earlier lack of success in school resulted from a subsequently diagnosed learning disorder such as dyslexia can

discuss the new reading and/or writing strategies they've employed to overcome these challenges.

Students who have had traumatic or other difficult experiences can discuss how they wrote a journal to help them cope.

When students focus on the reading and/or writing aspect of their experiences, they discover that they *have* used words to shape their worlds -- that they *do* have a literacy narrative.

[Conclusion]

Each semester when I teach English 111 I have to decide again which assignments to keep and which ones not to.

I experimented with leaving out the literacy narrative in favor of a less "me-centered" assignment.

But I've come back to it. I like that all students—regardless of their past experiences—can bring something to the table.

I like that when students write about themselves as writers (or readers) they develop a common connection within the classroom community.

I like that students with very different backgrounds and experiences find things in each other's experiences that they can appreciate and respect.

I like that students are usually academically successful in terms of the composition requirements of the assignment and so are in a good position to begin learning about other kinds of writing.

But I'll admit that underneath it all, I'm just like every other devotee of the memoir:

I LIKE HEARING THE STORIES.

Works Cited

Porter, Caroline, "Memoir and Autobiography in Composition Classes."

Resources for Writing Teachers. N.p, n.d. Web. 18 April 2015.

Yagoda, Ben. *Memoir: A History*. New York: Riverhead, 2009. Print.