

The Literacy Narrative as Production Pedagogy in the Composition Classroom

Using literacy narratives in the first-year composition classroom can shape a unique, sophisticated, student-driven language community.

by J. Blake Scott

Once it is allowed that how we speak and write is the product of how people speak in our homes, the speech customs in our native communities and early school years, in stores, on ball fields, in the movies, people will recognize these everyday language-use occasions. If one task of the literacy classroom is to try to reconstruct that history, then many hours can be spent thinking and asking friends and family about what one only partially remembers, and a surprising number of salient events of the past can be assembled. While it is never clear how “accurate” our memories are, the fact of having remembered something important always facilitates new reflection and analysis.

—David Bleich (183–84)

Introduction

The recent professional interest in literacy narratives has generated a body of valuable scholarship, dubbed by one of my colleagues as a “literacy narrative industry” (see Eldred; Eldred and Mortensen; Brodkey). This scholarship typically stops short, however, of providing writing teachers with specific ways to incorporate literacy narratives into their classrooms. In addition, much of this scholarship approaches the teaching of literacy narratives as an activity of reading rather than student writing or production.¹ For

Janet Carey Elred, Peter Mortensen, Mary Soliday, and other teachers of literacy narratives, the narratives of published, “professional” writers serve as readers for the class and lenses through which students sometimes develop and interpret their own narratives; the works of Richard Rodriguez et al. constitute the “canon” in the emerging literacy narrative industry.

In this essay, I offer a supplementary approach to teaching literacy narratives, one that builds on the work of Soliday and others, but one that is centered in student production. I begin by outlining specific strategies for teaching the literacy narrative in the first-year composition classroom. Next, I discuss possible benefits of teaching the student production of literacy narratives. Finally, I critically examine current methods of teaching literacy narratives, including my own method.

Strategies for Teaching Literacy Narratives

Before outlining a production pedagogy of literacy narratives, I want to define the terms *literacy* and *literacy narrative*. In this essay, literacy does not refer to a type of consciousness (in the manner of Walter J. Ong), or to a set of skills or body of knowledge that can be consumed (in the manner of E. D. Hirsch).

Instead, I define literacy as social meaning-making through language. This simple but flexible definition assumes that literacy is context dependent as well as socially constructed and enacted.² The literacy narrative, in turn, is a history or account of a person's development or accumulation of literacy. Students' literacy narratives can describe meaningful language experiences with their peers, at home, and at various community sites (i.e., neighborhoods, clubs, religious organizations).

When teaching this assignment, I use the term *literacy narrative* rather than *literacy autobiography* in order to highlight the constructedness of students' accounts; the word narrative blurs the fictional and nonfictional elements of their stories. Like Soliday, I think it is important to teach students to excavate/create their literacy histories in a way that emphasizes the narrativity and retrospectiveness of their accounts (512, 520). When I teach literacy narratives, I am less concerned with the authenticity of the stories students tell than with the fact that they see these stories as worth telling.

The literacy narrative can be taught in a variety of writing and literary courses, but I have taught it mostly in first-year composition. Like other writing events, the literacy narrative should probably be adjusted for each course and class. In the first unit of a public service writing course I taught at the University of Oklahoma, for instance, students wrote narratives about their nonacademic, community literacy experiences, such as writing club newsletters, reading Sunday school lessons, or writing graffiti on a bridge. In classes with large numbers of nontraditional students who have children, students could write literacy narratives comparing cross-generational literacy experiences such as learning to read. In classes with large numbers

of ESL students, students could compare reading and writing experiences in two or more languages.

Regardless of how I modify the assignment to fit a specific class, I employ three liberal, process-based strategies in teaching the invention of literacy narratives: 1) I engage students in a series of collaborative exercises; 2) I encourage students to develop their own approaches and focuses; and 3) I invent and write along with the students.

Teachers and students alike are often wary of personal or autobiographical writing assignments (i.e., the "remembered event" essay), even as such assignments remain a staple of first-year composition curricula. Through its focus on literacy, perhaps the most logical focus of personal writing in a composition class, the literacy narrative offers a way to avoid topics that teachers and students think of as too private or painful to share with a public audience. Nevertheless, some students are hesitant to write about their literacy development, less because they view it as too personal than because they view it as uninteresting or insignificant.

Collaboration can help students remember the significance of literacy events as well as help them explore the exigence for sharing these events. To facilitate invention, I set up forums for peer collaboration in groups of three to five. In these forums, students jog each others' memories of significant literacy events; early discussions typically produce a lot of "Oh yeah, I remember that" responses. Students also get a chance to see similarities and differences in their literacy backgrounds. It is at this point, when invention first gets underway, that I intervene by stressing the retrospectiveness and narrativity of the students' memories and developing stories.

To help students generate material for their narratives, I take them through a series of heuristic exercises as a class and in small groups. I often ask students to write about their literacy development in response to specific literacy questions that I have adopted from Deborah Brandt's interview outline in her ongoing study ("Literacy Learning"). These questions address *times, places, audiences, purposes, motivations, consequences, materials and technologies*, and other aspects of literacy events. The following is a sample of general questions I sometimes start with

- When do you first remember writing?
- Who were the biggest influences on your writing attitudes and practices?
- What writing experiences or events are the most memorable?
- What did you write in elementary school, junior high, and high school?
- What did you and your friends write in and out of school?
- What did you write in the community?
- What did you and your family members write at home?

After generating a list of memorable or significant events or experiences, students develop their analysis of each one with questions like the following:

- Why does this writing event stand out to you?
- What was the text like?
- Did you enjoy writing the text?
- What process did you go through in writing the text?
- Who else was associated with the writing?
- Were you instructed in the writing? If so, how?

- Why did you write the text?
- Who made up the audience?
- How did the audience respond?
- How did this response affect you?
- Where did the writing event occur?
- What materials did you use?

The two sets of questions above challenge students to expand their notions of what "counts" as writing and help them contextualize their writing and its effects. Like Soliday, I sometimes have students develop their own questions or lines of inquiry that frame the literacy narrative assignment more specifically (516).

Other specific heuristics I use include literacy timelines and the sharing of literacy "artifacts." Early on in the literacy narrative assignment, I have my students create three timelines—one for school, one for home, and one labeled "other" which could include literacy in the community and with peers—that highlight memorable events in their development as readers and writers. Students then share their timelines in small groups, adding events triggered by their classmates. Sometimes I have students bring in literacy "artifacts," such as poems or journals they wrote, and, in a "show and tell" setting, we reconstruct the rhetorical situations of those artifacts.

Because writing literacy narratives sometimes involves students excavating and reconstructing fuzzy or fragmented memories of events, they often rely on other people's memories and observations, as Brodkey acknowledges in the preface to her narrative and Bleich suggests in the epigraph to this essay. In such cases, students can interview others—including parents, friends, and teachers—to aid their memories of

themselves. In rare cases where students have blocked out groups of memories, such as learning grammar in junior high school, they can hypothesize about why they can't remember or focus on a different set of literacy experiences. Thus, students often collaborate with people outside of school in their invention. These people, in turn, sometimes become part of students' audiences for the narratives.

Since students' histories of their literacy developments encompass a wide range of events, they must focus on or give presence to a particular experience or set of experiences. I try to be as flexible and unobtrusive as possible while students determine their focuses. Most students write narratives that weave together literacy events at home and school or compare school literacy with peer or home literacy. Other students focus on more specific experiences. One student, for example, focused on the reading and writing transitions she made from high school to college at the University of Oklahoma. Doug, in his narrative entitled "Grandma's Table," focused on a single person's influence on his early literacy development—his grandmother. Another student focused on the therapeutic function of writing while she was institutionalized for heroin addiction. Recently, I have begun to encourage students to experiment with the style, arrangement, and delivery of their narratives. As a result, they sometimes produce texts that challenge traditional narrative structures. For instance, students have produced "postmodern" narratives that juxtapose actual writing from different periods in their lives with retrospective reflection.

In keeping with the community-building purpose of teaching literacy narratives, a purpose I will discuss in the next section, I invent and write my own

narrative along with the students. Sometimes I write about my literacy experiences growing up, and other times I reflect on my viewpoints and practices as a teacher of language and literacy.

The teaching of literacy doesn't have to end once students turn in their narratives. After the students and I complete the assignment, we share our stories and respond to those of others, creating a classroom dialogue centered on our different versions of literacy. I encourage students to send their narratives to people outside of class, especially people who are represented in the narratives. In an effort to validate student writing, I sometimes organize public readings and desktop published collections of student narratives. While it is important to celebrate students' literacies, it is also important for students (and teachers) to interrogate their own and each others' narratives. Here, again, the teacher should intervene, reminding students that the narratives are more than expressions of personal truths, and challenging them to further reflect on the significance and effects of their literacy development, something that is always in flux (See Brandt "Accumulating"). Thus, the literacy narrative is a starting point for further interrogation and reflection. For example, it can lead to a more academic, argumentative essay, one in which students stake out a position that reveals their understanding of others' views on literacy (Greene).

Benefits of Teaching Literacy Narratives

Several benefits result from writing and discussing literacy narratives in the composition classroom. First and perhaps most importantly, literacy narratives can help validate students as authors and

writers. As an introductory assignment to the literacy narrative, I sometimes ask first-year students to describe themselves as writers. Sadly, students often give self-limiting descriptions, telling me that they are not writers at all, or that they are “only academic” or “just creative” writers. By excavating and writing about a variety of literacy experiences, including everyday language acts they might normally overlook or dismiss as trivial or having nothing to do with “real” writing, students sometimes expand their definitions of literacy and writing, and thus their definitions of themselves as writers. In addition, an emphasis on writing their own narratives tells students that their stories and texts are the center of the course and worthy of study.

As students explore literacy experiences from their earliest childhood memories to the present, they sometimes recognize the social-constructedness of their literacy attitudes and practices. In his narrative about learning to write, Joe, for example, remembered falling behind and receiving negative reinforcement because his arm was in a cast when his class was learning cursive writing. According to Joe, this experience not only contributed to his discomfort with writing, but to his practice of writing mainly with a word processor. In his narrative entitled “A Story of a Third Grade Reader,” Tom reflects on how being tracked influenced his literacy attitudes:

The teachers thought I was a slow learner, so I sometimes had to get special help. . . . This led to some kids calling me stupid and other things kids do to each other. Consequently, I was put into a lower reading group and the tormenting continued. This led me to dislike writing and reading. If you are told you're not good at something, you soon find yourself not doing it.

In “The Poet That Never Was,” Cynthia writes about how her mother positively influenced her self-concept as a writer by praising her poetry and encouraging her to write in a blue satin journal.

Many of our students come to us entrenched in what Bleich calls the ideology of individualism, which reinforces limiting self-definitions. The literacy narrative can help combat this ideology and cultivate students' literacies by emphasizing the social relatedness of language (Bleich 70). Students can also explore how experiences in their lives affect their literacy as well. The literacy narrative, through its emphasis on literacy as social action, can help both students and teachers recognize and critique their literacies in light of the discourse communities to which they belong. As Joseph Harris has pointed out, students have always been simultaneously involved with multiple discourse communities, and our job should be to “offer them the chance to reflect critically on those discourses—of home, school, work, the media, and the like—to which they already belong” (19).

In addition to making students more aware of how their attitudes about writing and self-concepts as writers are socially determined, the literacy narrative can help establish a unique and sophisticated classroom language community. Bleich explains, “In the process of writing an ‘ethnography’ of one’s own language-use strategies, one creates a new moment of language use and naming, a moment for the new community of interest, the class” (184). For Bleich, the classroom community includes students and the teacher as its literacy-shaping members.

Following the axiom that the writing teacher should always write, teachers should write literacy autobiographical

narratives along with their students. As Brodkey's narrative demonstrates, the literacy narrative offers the writing teacher a powerful way to recognize her or his own influences and theories and become part of a developing community of writers. The classroom community I describe is sophisticated because it is metacommunicative; literacy narratives, by their very nature, provide a forum in which students can develop metacommunicative critiques of themselves and others. Like Soliday, I require my students to move beyond description of their literacy experiences to convey the significance and effects of those experiences. Not only do students write, they write and reflect about writing and other literacy acts. In this way, students' narratives throw into relief the knowledge and literacy they already have. Through writing the literacy narrative, usually the first assignment of the course (the place of the expressive, personal essay in many first-year courses), the students and I begin to develop a self-reflexive vocabulary and conceptual framework that we use in subsequent writing assignments, discussions, and writing workshops. Writing and speaking self-reflexively about writing seems to be easier and more comfortable for many students after the literacy narrative assignment.

Finally, a production pedagogy of literacy narratives can be an inductive, student-driven way to discuss practices and theories of writing. As a writing teacher, I find it extremely helpful to learn about the literacy backgrounds my students bring with them. Students' literacy narratives help me see the students as complex people with histories. They also help me decide where to go in my teaching of writing and rhetorical theory for the rest of the course; I might need to discuss the limitations of standard ex-

pressivist writing theory with students, for example. In writing about their memorable literacy experiences, students invariably bring up a variety of issues and commonplaces the class can further explore, including relationships between reading and writing, writing with different media and technologies, tracking in reading groups and writing classes, teacher evaluations of writing, and other pedagogical practices such as the teaching of literary analysis and current traditional rhetoric.

As I mentioned earlier, I often use literacy narratives as starting places for further interrogation and discussion, including discussion about the composition and rhetorical theory on which students rely (consciously or not). Students often reveal, implicitly and explicitly, versions of Berlin's expressionistic and social-epistemic rhetorics, for example. In the following passage of "Rabbits of the Rim," Heather reflects on a liberal, expressionistic function of her writing:

It [writing] was a simple tool that allowed me to spill out my intensity, insanity and reality onto paper. I had absolutely no idea how to fill up the inner void burning a hole through my soul, but I could fill up a blank page of paper with my free associations and ink. Writing gave me the outlet that I found nowhere else. I could print my experience, strength, hope, fear, pain and dreams, therefore setting them free. My feelings would boil over inside of me and the bubbles and froth would come pouring out through the tip of my pen.

In his biting pedagogical critique "What Went Wrong," Doug explains how his attitudes about writing and reading were partly constructed by his experiences with different teachers in school:

My tenth grade teacher, Mrs. Smith, was a total witch. . . . She never taught us anything. Instead, she made us read from the

textbook, and we had to figure it out for ourselves. This is how I learned about the five paragraph essay, thesis statement, and other familiar concepts. We also had to read numerous short stories that we would be tested over. We rarely discussed them, and after the quiz she would just assign the next story. This helped destroy any motivation that I had to read.

Not all students, of course, will offer such thoughtful accounts of literacy development, just as not all students and teachers will experience the benefits discussed above.

Approaches to Teaching Literacy Narratives

A variety of theoretical and political positions underpin approaches to teaching literacy narratives. Most approaches draw from a combination of theoretical and ideological positions, which I categorize generally as conservative, liberal, and left. The current emphasis on the reading and interpretation of published, “professional” literacy narratives is partly conservative in that it stabilizes the ideas and stories of a few select authors, conserving and preserving their versions of literacy and literacy development. The danger in this position is its potential to marginalize student writing. When writing teachers emphasize the consumption and modeling of others’ narratives, particularly nonstudent ones, they run the risk of becoming monologic narrators of their curricula, a position Paulo Friere warns against in his description of the “banking concept” of education. According to Friere, this teacher-controlled narration can promote passivity in students (58). Furthermore, by emphasizing model narratives against which to measure and define student ones, teachers may reinforce high/low distinctions be-

tween professional or literary and student writing.

The emphasis on reading professional narratives just described is not accidental. Instead, I would argue, it is a manifestation of a widespread practice in English studies—the privileging of literary consumption over student production. In *Textual Power*, Robert Scholes outlines the hierarchy of power in the typical English department based on a consumption/production opposition. According to Scholes, the consumption of “literature” is at the top of this hierarchy, and the production of student texts or “pseudo-non-literature” is relegated to the bottom (7). Susan Miller, in *Textual Carnivals*, confirms Scholes’ hierarchical schema. Both Scholes and Miller associate the marginalization of composition with the marginalization of student writing. Likewise, Min-Zhan Lu writes, “we ourselves are guilty of perpetuating the divisions between composition and other areas of English Studies by approaching the writings of ‘beginners’ or ‘outsiders’ in a manner different from the approach we take to the writings of ‘experts’” (443). In examining the English department or, on a smaller scale, the composition classroom, it is crucial for us to ask ourselves, “Whose literacy (narratives) are we studying and why?”

Less conservative approaches to teaching literacy narratives, including Soliday’s approach which combines the reading of canonized narratives with student production, tend to idealize narratives as acts of student resistance or, to use Soliday’s term, translation. The enthusiasm many writing teachers express for teaching literacy narratives may have its roots in their own leftist, Friirian agendas of enabling students to challenge dominant ideologies of “cultural literacy” (Eldred and Mortensen 515). Often drawing on criti-

cal or liberatory pedagogy and Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the "contact zone," Soliday and others see the literacy narrative as a "framework for reflecting upon linguistic and cultural translation" in which students highlight issues of resistance and assimilation (516).³ Soliday describes her student Alicia's narrative, for example, as an "autoethnography," a self-translation that challenges others' representations of oneself (519). Aronowitz and Giroux describe a student-centered "border pedagogy" in terms of resistance, perhaps idealizing the effects of this resistance. Writing teachers should be critical of approaches to the literacy narrative that view it mainly as a means of exploring resistance and/or assimilation of dominant ideologies, for such approaches can misrepresent and patronize students; the writing of a literacy narrative is neither a revolutionary act nor a conversion experience for most students. Unlike Soliday's Alicia, many students do not view their literacy development in terms of contact zones. Many of my first-year writing students at Penn State, for example, would have problems identifying or recognizing such spaces. Students' literacies are formed in intersections of various home, school, peer, and community influences, as Brandt suggests, but these intersections are not always zones of conflict.

In its constructs of the teacher, the student, and the classroom, the production pedagogy of literacy narratives I describe is more liberal than conservative or left. For example, I try to center my course on the material texts of students, and I define myself, in part, as a facilitator working to create a classroom environment in which students freely explore their perceptions of themselves as readers and writers. This is not to say that I treat these perceptions as individual truths, as I have already indicated. Also, I

don't delude myself into thinking my pedagogy radically disrupts the traditional teacher-student power relationship; students will typically produce what they think the teacher wants to read. Similarly, my students often produce narratives that focus on their literacy experiences with teachers in school, probably because they know that I'm interested in pedagogical practices. I'm not suggesting that the teacher's influence in shaping the students' narratives invalidates the narratives, or that the teacher should or can erase this influence. What we can do, however, is recognize and reflect on our roles as teachers, and be flexible in the kinds of narratives we encourage students to write, enabling them to choose the literacy stories that will contribute to the class discussion of literacy.

In addition to its liberal underpinnings, my approach draws from Aronowitz and Giroux's more radical border pedagogy, which they describe in the following passage:

Border pedagogy confirms and critically engages the knowledge and experience through which students author their own voices and construct social identities. . . . In this case, student experience has first to be understood and recognized as the accumulation of collective memories and stories that provide students with a sense of familiarity, identity, and practical knowledge. Such an experience has to be both affirmed and critically interrogated. (128–29)

Emphasizing the memories and stories of students recognizes and affirms them as authors with complex literacy histories. This affirmation must be accompanied by critique, however, as Bleich suggests in the epigraph and Aronowitz and Giroux state above. While many students will not engage in radical social critique (indeed, some of them will

hardly move beyond description), the teaching of literacy narratives can, with the teacher's guidance and later intervention, lead to further reflection and critical interrogation. In a student-based approach to teaching literacy narratives, students engage in the textual criticism Scholes calls for in *Textual Power*; only their criticism focuses on their own texts and those of others in the class.

Notes

1. Although Soliday outlines some methods for teaching “remedial and freshman students” to write autobiographical narratives about literacy, these methods depend heavily on students reading and analyzing the professional model stories of others—including Richard Rodriguez, Amy Tan, and Gloria Naylor—before writing literacy stories themselves (516).

2. Deborah Brandt, in *Literacy as Involvement*, and Shirley Brice Heath, in *Ways with Words*, describe literacy in terms of local events or addresses or involvement. This emphasis on context is a crucial part of the literacy narrative. As Brandt suggests in “Remembering Writing, Remembering Reading,” studies of literacy and literacy narratives should focus on the contexts of how reading and writing actually enter people's lives (460). In *The Double Perspective*, David Bleich more specifically defines literacy as a “series of culturally encouraged language use strategies” that we develop in our relationships with others (73).

3. Richard E. Miller and Min-Zhan Lu propose composition pedagogies based on Pratt's contact zone. I categorize critical pedagogy as left because of its ultimate goal of empowering students to challenge the status quo of the dominant culture. One could argue, though, that leftist ideology has itself become dominant in composition studies.

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