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Re-thinking Personal Narrative in the Pedagogy of Writing Teacher Preparation

Mary M. Juzwik

Michigan State University, mmjuzwik@msu.edu

Anne Whitney

Pennsylvania State University, awhitney@psu.edu

April Baker Bell

Michigan State University, adbell@msu.edu

Amanda Smith

Michigan State University, arsmith07@gmail.com

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About the Author

Justin Young has taught writing at City College of New York, the University of Oklahoma, and Claremont McKenna College. Currently, he is an Assistant Professor of English at Eastern Washington University, where he directs the composition program and Writers’ Center. His research focuses on literacy instruction at both the K-12 and college level. Specifically, his work explores the ways that improved reading and writing instruction can better prepare students across the K-16 continuum to communicate effectively in both print and in digital environments and to succeed in college.

Re-thinking Personal Narrative in the Pedagogy of Writing Teacher Preparation Introduction



Mary M. Juzwik, *Michigan State University*
 Anne Whitney, *Pennsylvania State University*
 April Baker Bell, *Michigan State University*
 Amanda Smith, *Michigan State University*

The role that personal narrative writing should play in the teaching of English in secondary schools is a question that members of our field have returned to again and again. Further, it is a question that onlookers of our work—both critical and supportive—have argued about. At one extreme, David Coleman, the dominant figure behind the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts, has notoriously said about personal writing that “as you grow up in this world you realize people really don’t give a shit about what you feel or what you think” (10). Yet multiple voices in the field of English education have drawn out the complex connections between personal and academic writing, making compelling arguments for the importance of the former, both in its own right and as a contributor to developing competence in the latter (see as just a few examples Hillocks, *Narrative*; Fredricksen, Wilhelm, and Smith; Kittle; Smagorinsky, Augustine, and O’Donnell-Allen). We find their arguments compelling. We see personal narrative as one of the many ways people make arguments in the world of discourse in school and beyond; further, we have seen how students engaged in personal narrative writing so often find themselves drawn into experimentation with different approaches in a text, deep revision, and a commitment to precise expression that we see as critical to learning writing.

Our own desire to prepare English language arts teachers to teach personal narrative well stems also from our sense of the socially mediated identity work that written and oral narrative texts accomplish in people’s lives. Narrative is one of the primary ways that people understand, experience, and create reality (Bruner). As described by Bakhtin, narrative is dialogic. Any utterance made in speech or in text emerges as a part of an ongoing conversation, begun long before an individual speaks (or writes!) and carrying on long after. In this way, all stories respond to previous stories and anticipate stories that will be told in the future. Our narrations join other narrations in a tangled web of dialogue through which we take up, reject, and re-appropriate the words of others while inviting listeners to do the same with our words. Further, they vary in shape and function according to culture (Cazden). In addition to being dialogic and contextually embedded, narratives are also “intersubjective--belonging to the context as well as to the author,” (Daiute 113). In this way, narrative is implicated in self-authoring. Mead suggests that, in part, we author ourselves as a result of our own objective introspection regarding our thoughts and behaviors. In order to accomplish this work, we must become an ‘other’ to ourselves. That process of self-consciousness, Mead contends, remains social in nature as we human beings take up the position of an “other” to interrogate ourselves (215). Viewing narrative in this manner, as socially and dialogically shaped in the context of culture and instrumental to a process of self-authoring, pushes us to re-consider narrative writing in terms of what it might *do* for students, both in and beyond classrooms.

However, understanding personal narrative in these ways is not the same as teaching it well—or of preparing teachers to do so. As Hillocks reminds us in his introduction to a book for teachers on teaching narrative (*Narrative*), too often we “teach” narrative by reading examples of narratives and then assigning narratives, failing to teach strategies that might result in good narratives. Even more rarely do narrative texts written in school (or any other kinds of texts written in school, for that matter) actually go anywhere beyond the teacher, thus failing to offer students experience in negotiating meanings with readers, working out the versions of self in context that narrative writing can foster. Teaching personal narrative well, in ways that are consistent with our view of personal narrative’s value and the identity work it can support, has proven challenging. In the pages that follow, we describe and reflect on one effort to do so in a teacher education setting, in a class-to-class partnership between teacher candidates and first-year college writers. We introduce the example not as a success story or an exemplar, but rather as a problematic case (Bush) causing us to reconsider a) our sense of the purposes and possibilities of personal narrative writing in secondary schools and b) the uses and pedagogies of personal narrative writing in English teacher education.

A Narrative Writing Partnership

The writing partnership discussed here occurred in and across the English education and first year writing programs at a large public university. Mary taught a writing workshop course for secondary English teacher candidates in the English department, and April taught a first year composition course that was a university requirement for undergraduates (most, but not all, were first year students; we call these students “first-year writers” for simplicity). Through narrative writing, Mary wanted the teacher candidates to a) write narratives, b) critically reflect on and expand their own processes as narrative writers and

c) learn to teach narrative writing.¹ A goal across the course was to expand students' repertoires for teaching writing beyond the 5-paragraph theme that historically pervades secondary schooling and which was likely to be emphasized in many of their school placements (Johnson et al.). Throughout the semester, she asked students to don different perspectives: as writers, as students of writing, and as teachers of writing. Teacher candidates wrote "In the moment" narratives (Assignment included in Appendix A).

April embedded narrative writing within a semester-long inquiry into cultures that had been silenced, misrepresented, or ignored. In most cases, students chose to study cultures they in some way identified with— such as Black culture, Asian American culture, Turkish culture, Chinese culture, etc. Learning about the culture drove all major assignments in the course.¹ The narrative assignment gave students an opportunity to share and interpret individual experience(s) with the culture in light of and in ways that responded to or talked back to themes in other texts they had read and/or written (Assignment included in Appendix B).

Although Mary and April sought to frame narrative writing as purposeful social and dialogic work, we did not always realize our goals. Those missed opportunities become fodder for thinking about the challenges facing instructors trying to facilitate rhetorically purposeful narrative writing in formal educational settings including secondary English courses, first year composition courses, and writing teacher preparation courses. A few specific challenges are shared in more detail below.

Vulnerability in Writing the Narrative

Writers on both sides of the partnership described feeling vulnerable or fearful about narrative writing and the partnership work. It is true that the teacher candidates seemed grateful for the opportunity to write narratives, especially in the course context of reflecting more on their writing processes. They reported enjoying the "freedom" or "liberation" of the invitation to write personal narratives (vs. academic arguments). Yet despite their enthusiasm for exploring their "own personal writing style[s]," teacher candidates were also worried about sharing their narrative writing with colleagues and with first-year writers: it seemed to up the ante for the writing, creating a feeling of "vulnerability" that they were not accustomed to as (mostly) high-achieving students. One teacher candidate connected this feeling to a scarcity of invitations for personal writing as a secondary and college student: "First of all, this is probably the only personal narrative I have written during my pursuit of higher education. Prior to this paper, I had not written any form of personal essay since my freshman year of high school. Second of all, I am not accustomed to feeling vulnerable in my writing." Emotions of fear, judgement, and sorrow (i.e., the reference to potentially making writers cry through harsh critique) lace through teacher candidates' and -- to a lesser extent -- first-year writers' reflections and responses to the narrative writing and to their roles in the narrative writing partnership.

The phenomenon comports with Brandt's finding that while reading is associated with favorable memories (e.g., sharing books at bedtime), writing is more often associated with negative emotions and with painful memories. We are left wondering how we can design narrative writing invitations and partnerships that respect and acknowledge potentially painful or negative memories and associations with writing while constructing a new – and perhaps, more positively emotionally valenced – set of experiences and identities with writing? What set of conditions might make it possible for teacher candidates to undertake the painful emotional work that narrative writing may invite in the context of a class required for teacher certification? Yet we also find value in the discomfort that students, particularly candidates, felt in the exchange: we value the opportunity for teacher candidates to feel vulnerable as writers and students, because it is a position in which teachers so often place students.

Framing Purposeful Contexts for Narrative Writing

Mary and April strove to frame purposeful contexts for students to compose narratives in both courses, paying particular attention to audience and to topics and content. We addressed audience differently across the two assignment invitations. Mary explicitly discussed audience on page 2 of her assignment, listing "go public" as part of the process for completing the assignment and elaborating, "We will share drafts of our narratives with our writing groups and with our [first year] writing partners. If you like, distribute your narrative to other audiences beyond our class." Rather than framing the writing partners as the chief audience for the assignment, then, she invited students to imagine their classmates, their writing partners, and others beyond either class as equally relevant audiences for the writing. April's assignment, on the other hand, named the chief audience for the cultural narratives as pre-service English teachers interested in "(1) learning how first-year writers use narratives to write about cultures they belong to, (2) understanding the experiences of cultures that are often excluded from popular culture, and (3) considering how this experience would help them to think about how to teach narratives in their future classes." Thus the first-year writers were asked to focus on the teacher candidates as their primary audience, whereas the teacher candidates were told that they would be sharing with the first-year writers but were asked to think about audience more broadly.

We also framed the topics of the narrative and the processes of inquiry or invention differently across the two assignments. Mary asked teacher candidates to write a personal narrative about a brief moment within their own life experience. She prompted, "What vivid moments do you remember? Bad memories? Good memories? Puzzling memories? Can you pinpoint moments that have been turning points or especially significant for you? Why? How? Write in your exploratory writing forum about these and related topics to get your juices and memories flowing." These were followed with a series of in-class activities – adapted from ideas found in Dornan et al. and Lamott, two course texts – to facilitate invention. April embedded the task within a semester-long cultural inquiry project, organized around the theme "(Un)silencing, (Re)representing, and (Un)

ignoring Voices from Excluded Cultures." The first-year writers engaged in ongoing reading, research, and writing about the culture they chose to study, and the narrative was then framed as one way – among many possibilities – for representing for others what they had learned through their cultural inquiries.

It is reasonable to read Mary's assignment sheet as inviting students to write narrative for the sake of crafting a narrative text (See Goal 1 on assignment sheet), rather than for the sake of accomplishing the identity work we have committed ourselves to accomplish. Yet her assignment was also situated within the course as a whole, a goal of which was to challenge candidates to envision writing as a structured process -- with different processes appropriate for different purposes and different genres appropriate to accomplish those purposes. She wanted students to grapple with what it might mean to become a teacher of writing who does not rely primarily on the 5-paragraph theme so engrained in the "apprenticeship of observation" in school (Lortie). Thus the primary purposes of the narrative assignment included a) developing identities and repertoires as narrative writers and teachers of narrative writing, b) developing rationales for the teaching of narrative writing, and c) sharing and developing interpretations about the significance of specific moments in life (i.e., the moments in time about which student wrote). It is an irony, then, that the invitation to work through these purposes via narrative reduced these purposes into an invitation simply to compose a personal narrative. We note similar ironies in April's assignment for first-year writers. Students choosing to study a culture with which they themselves affiliated seems to build in an opportunity for the kind of identity work that narrative writing can involve. Yet in the text of the assignment, that identity work remains tacit rather than explicitly named, and we still read the title "cultural narrative" at its top.

In crafting assignments, then, both Mary and April faced challenges as they worked to create a purposeful context for narrative writing. To different degrees, the assignment texts obscured the potentially powerful purposes by asking students to "write narrative for the sake of writing narrative." Admittedly, powerful factors shape our choices to label assignments as invitations to write "narrative," rather than as invitations to do some sort of identity work advancing the purpose of becoming writing teachers or becoming cultural activists or advocates. Among these are a) writing standards, such as the CCSS and the first year writing program curriculum guidelines, decreeing that secondary and college students must learn to write a proper narrative text, b) accountability pressures facing schools and universities (including the testing regimes in which writing teacher education occurs), and c) students' learned legacies of writing to give the teacher what she wants for the good grade, rather than writing to accomplish meaningful work in the world.

In retrospect, we see that one helpful move toward a more fully social, dialogic, and purposeful approach to personal narrative writing would have been to make the identity work more explicitly a part of the assignment, for example articulating that a key assignment aim is to move forward on the journey toward "becoming a cultural activist" (April's assignment) and to "becoming a narrative writing teacher" (Mary's assignment). How we present that goal matters, though, lest the assignment simply invite a perfunctory identity performance, again for the grade (Newkirk). The challenge is to create a pedagogical situation where students are persuaded that narratives can accomplish meaningful social work for them, rather than a more didactic pedagogical situation where students digest and produce the narrative form in ways described and prescribed by a teacher on an assignment sheet.

The "expert" writing partner

Having drafted their respective personal narratives, the teacher candidates and the first-year writers met for a face-to-face workshop session, five weeks into the fifteen-week semester. As you will see, the ironies that characterized Mary and April's initial assignments carried forward into this encounter. In the description, we quote from notes made by both instructors on sessions before, during, and after the workshop as well as students' written reflections on the process.

Writers approached the workshop with different aims. For the first-year writers, it was a chance to work with their designated audience for the writing; for the teacher candidates, it was an encounter with an audience for their writing but also an encounter with a version of the audience for their emerging identities as teachers. The purpose of the workshop conversations, as set by the instructors, was for the first-year writers to receive feedback – from both their own classmates and the teacher candidates – on the first drafts of their narrative. Although teacher candidates were also beginning to write in-the-moment narratives, discussed above, they were not invited share their own drafts with the first-year writers, though they would eventually share revised versions with the first year writers on a wiki space, to which their partners would respond with comments. This decision positioned the two groups of writers asymmetrically, much more so than their different levels of experience would have already produced. And from this decision followed several problems.

The teacher candidates felt nervous before leading the workshop with the first year writers. In the class session before the workshop, they talked through their fears and brainstormed strategies for addressing them and making it maximally helpful. One candidate confessed concern about how the first year writers would perceive her. Several admitted they did not feel comfortable setting themselves up on a pedestal as "writing experts." The first year writers, too, were anxious about working with the teacher candidates. While many looked forward to receiving feedback that would help them improve their cultural narratives, they feared receiving corrective feedback that was all too familiar to them.

The first-year writers posted their narratives to blogs. As the writers read their pieces aloud, the teacher candidates and their colleagues followed along with the narratives on the blog. After reading aloud, the groups discussed the pieces, for example what was working well in the narratives and how they might be strengthened. Mary and April overheard some animated,

substantive conversations, such as one group discussing different ways of defining the term “culture” and what the implications might be for narrative writing.²

The workshop certainly accomplished one identity-mediating goal for teacher candidates: it provided an opportunity for them to gain experience – and in many cases, confidence – in leading conversations about narrative writing. As one teacher candidate reflected:

I’ve been sort of afraid that I wouldn’t know how to respond, because I really haven’t done that much in terms of responding to students’ [narrative] writing...but it was really encouraging to realize that I do know a fair bit about the subject... There were definitely times when I was at a loss of how to express myself...but even then I knew what I wanted [to] say. It was a good taste of what responding to students will look like...

In leading conversations with first year writers about their narratives, teacher candidates had an opportunity to see that they knew more than they realized – it offered an opportunity for them to make their tacit knowledge about writing more explicit. In a similar vein, one teacher candidate said to Mary afterward, half-joking, “Success! I didn’t make anyone cry!” Thus the teacher candidates’ experiences leading a conversation with first year writers seemed to offer a space for taking up a new teaching identity. Teacher candidates could re-story themselves in response to their experiences leading talk about narrative writing, while anticipating future interactions with imagined students. Therefore, the first year writers’ narratives become artifacts mediating the performance of expertise for teacher candidates.

Yet it was not only teacher candidates who sometimes reported finding a more authoritative, “expert” place to stand via the workshop experience. Though the design of the activity explicitly cast teacher candidates into the role of experts, at least one first-year writer also saw herself as an expert who was teaching the teacher candidates. For her, writing and sharing the narrative about her cultural experience with others was “not simply about telling the story,” but also it was about using narrative writing to “teach the culture” to the teacher candidates. The student was thus able to move beyond simply telling a story or striving for self-expression; rather, she articulated the value of the narrative sharing in relation to the culture she selected to study, her own life, and the lives of others. Further, though the student did not say this, she and her first-year classmates were also “teaching” the teacher candidates about teaching writing by making themselves available to the partnership in the first place.

Though they were not asked to evaluate their partners’ work but instead provide feedback, as teacher candidate donned the “mantle of the expert” (Bolton and Heathcote) they deployed a good deal of evaluative language, much of it praise. For example, as one teacher candidate put it, “I’m very much impressed by the level of skill in the freshman students. Not only were they proficient writers on a structural and grammatical level; they were also capable of creating work that was evocative and engaging. Color me impressed” (underlines added). We use the underlining here to emphasize the overtly evaluative language, which Mary and April noticed across many of the teacher candidates’ responses to the workshop. Another teacher candidate commented:

The students were much better writers than I anticipated. I thought that they would have problems with structure, organization, etc. On the contrary, their writing was very natural. The main problem was grammar and run-on sentences. The narratives were engaging and enjoyable. I tried to encourage them. I also tried to show them their strengths and how to build upon them.

Here again, the teacher candidate evaluates the first year students as “much better writers than I anticipated” and “very natural,” enacting a stance of primarily positive evaluative judgment. Yet this positive evaluation and the role into which it cast her seemed to preclude a more substantive reflection about how and why the narrative pieces, especially such global aspects as structure, work well for her as a reader. And the stance, at least as articulated in this example, did not reflect hard thinking about how the narratives might work better – and how she might help others grow as narrative writers by describing her responses to their writing – what the writing does for her – more thickly.³

If a goal of our writing assignments and cross-class exchange was to foreground the social, dialogic purpose of narrative writing, then our set-up fell short. The two teacher candidates quoted here seemed to fall back on a historical script that typically defines student-teacher relations in school. The teacher issues an invitation (whether that is an oral question or a written assignment), the student responds (whether with a verbal answer or a piece of writing), and the teacher evaluates that response (whether in writing or verbally) (Mehan; Nystrand; Sinclair and Coulthard). The two teacher candidates quoted here, at some level, seemed to experience the partnership as practice in responding to writing as an evaluative act. Thus if they are engaged in identity work here, learning to inhabit the role of teacher of writing, they seem to be developing a writing teacher identity oriented more toward evaluation than to dialogic exchange.

What might disrupt that pervasive evaluative script that saturates most teacher candidates’ experiences of schooling? One possibility is a partnership where teacher candidates workshopped their own papers with the first year writers, positioning the two writers more as peers than as teacher and student. Similarly, if the candidates and the first-year writers were working on the same assignment, that too might help to push candidates away from evaluative language toward the exchanging of lives and the dialogic identity work that narrative is so well-suited to accomplish. Re-framing their role in the exchange that emphasized their identities as writers and de-emphasized their identities as future teachers might have helped enact a more intersubjective stance toward narrative writing and de-emphasized the evaluative stance. Yet even here the differences in sophistication as writers between a college freshman and a college senior, combined with the candidates’ own awareness that they will soon be classroom teachers of writing, made it difficult to move beyond the evaluative paradigm so closely linked to the teacher role in candidates’

imaginations (Whitney). Even a teacher candidate who expressly reported feeling uncomfortable with evaluation somehow felt it was her task, though that task had not been assigned: “My only problem? Erm...My own babbling and my own disinclination to critique the work of others. What right do we have to judge a personal narrative? What right does anyone? I suppose, as readers, we are granted that right. In that case, this reader was entertained.”

Re-Framing Personal Narrative Writing as Identity Work

If what writing teacher educators value in narrative writing is its potential effects on the writer – in this case to foster identity formation, to promote the development of values as writing teachers, and a set of classroom approaches consistent with those values – then what would happen if we attended first and foremost to what Yagelski and Whitney have called “the transformative power of writing”? What if we focused on what the act of writing – connected to, but non-synonymous with, the text produced – does to and for the writer? Yagelski gives an example of a student who writes a narrative about a confrontation with her mother, a moment in which her mother’s alcoholism finally became too great a burden for her to bear and in which she took control of the relationship’s boundaries in order to protect herself (a story strikingly similar in theme to one written by a teacher candidate in the partnership we have discussed). As Yagelski explains, “Typically, we value the honesty and the raw power of such writing but focus on how students tell their stories—that is, on the ‘quality’ of their texts”. Where the student is using the writing to get life work done, the teacher – even a teacher who cares about the student’s purpose and would consider fostering such work as one of her primary goals as a teacher – ends up framing the writing experience, both in instruction and in response, as an experience (perhaps an aesthetic experience) in writing narrative rather than as an experience in identity formation or any of the other goals to which the student writer applies the act of composition.

Instruction, in turn, focuses more on the text (describing it, altering it, improving it) than on the composing process (what it was like to produce the text and what happened to the writer in producing it). In light of what we learned from our students about emotional vulnerability surrounding narrative writing, focusing attention on the text itself may well be a mechanism for distancing oneself from the loaded emotionality of narrative text production. However, when our goals for a writing assignment in a teacher education course are centered on helping teacher candidates to get some of the “life work” of becoming a teacher done, and we make available to students a particular form (like narrative) which we imagine will be useful in getting that work done, we err if we then allow the focus to slip to the form of the text. As Yagelski observes, the important insight here is that the form of the writing doesn’t matter, for it is the act of writing that teaches, no matter the form, if we pay attention to it. An obsession with the product of writing, with the “quality” of the text, however, obscures the insight that might be gained from writing itself (20).

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

Bonnie Sunstein has commented that partnerships can focus the writing efforts of achievement-oriented teacher candidates more squarely on communicative purpose and on accomplishing something in the world besides winning them a good grade for a class, a language game which – at institutions like ours, anyway – they are quite adept at playing. Following Sunstein’s lead, we are experimenting with other partnerships across disparate groups (“unequal partners,” in her words), for example between teacher candidates and sixth graders. While we find value in building partnerships beyond schools (e.g., between teacher candidates and prison inmates), we speculate that school-based partnerships may be especially powerful for teacher candidates and their urgent concern to get “real-world experiences” in schools.

We do recognize the many obstacles to framing writing in the way we suggest, especially in the context of teacher education. The standards documents with which teacher candidates are becoming familiar (e.g., the CCSS) treat forms of writing – like narrative – as ends, rather than as tools to accomplish broader life purposes. Since writing is too rarely framed in this purpose-driven way in schools, it is – without a powerful intervening experience – difficult to persuade teacher candidates that doing important identity work is *possible* in secondary writing classrooms. Certainly powerful legacies and rationales sustain the enduring practices of form-obsessed writing instruction (e.g., Johnson et al.). It is also the case that most of us teach within programmatic constraints, whether in a composition program, in an English education program within an English department, or in a teacher education program housed in a department or college of education. Certain institutional restraints (for example, the First Year writing requirement at Michigan State University, Standards for Teacher Preparation, or a limited number of English language arts methods courses) may make writing partnerships difficult to accomplish. Moreover, in an era of resource scarcity – both in higher and K-12 education – the logistical work required to collaborate in a writing partnership can be downright frightening.

As we critically reflect on our efforts to work toward a dialogic, identity-constructive approach to narrative writing teacher preparation, we wonder what could happen if we as teacher educators made a commitment to designing narrative writing invitations – explicitly with students, not just in our own minds – as opportunities to do something important with others? Would it be possible or desirable to re-frame the assignments we’ve discussed here? What if we developed opportunities for exploring identities through narrative collaborations, rather than assigning exercises in narrative writing, the content of which is personal or cultural? If we were to make such a shift, does it then make sense to focus in a more strategic way on specific forms, framed

as helping our future teachers think about some social-purpose-driven questions: “How does narrative do important work? What is it helpful for? For making certain kinds of points? For making points in certain contexts? For performing certain kinds of selves in given contexts?” Such an approach – focusing less on narrative *qua* narrative – has the merit of letting us and our teacher candidates see narrative writing much more expansively than we (and the standards discourses surrounding us) often do.

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Appendix A: Mary’s Narrative Assignment

English 400 Personal Narrative Assignment: “In the Moment”

“To see the world in a grain of sand, and heaven in a wildflower” – William Blake

Full Draft DUE: 2/17

Final DUE: 2/27 at 12:30 PM EST

Goals:

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

Assignment:

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

- “Art is *selectivity*. You cannot re-create every minute detail about anything, neither about an event nor about a person; therefore, that which you choose to include, or to omit, is significant—and you have to watch carefully the implications of what you say or omit” (Ayn Rand). Narrow your focus from the start. Select a story out of one, tiny, narrow corner of your life and avoid expanding on all the details around the story. Do not provide an introduction or an explanatory epilogue conclusion that explains what it is all about. Let the story speak for itself and trust your readers to make sense of your situation as described. Telling about a time when you had to make a quick decision, for example, can work very well. Or you may try telling about a life-and-death moment or a turning point in your life.
- Relate your experience in a way that begins to reveal its *significance* to you. In other words, don’t simply write about the event; show us how it affected you and why it was a significant experience. This is very tricky to pull off successfully. On the one hand, you don’t want to over-tell the story in such a way that gives your readers nothing to make sense of on their own. On the other hand, you don’t want to alienate your readers by confusing them with not enough information to comprehend your situation. And further still, you don’t want to simply state the facts of your situation without embedding some sort of context which lends meaning and depth to your situation.
- I recommend that you not choose to write an experience that is deeply distressing to you, such as the death of a loved one. In the past, I have found that many students struggle to craft such events into compelling narratives.
- Try to stick to using *first or third person* and experiment with *dialogue* as dialogue always brings your story into active, present tense which is enlivening for your readers. On a related note, successful dialogue on the page is not merely an accurate representation of what people say in real life; rather, it is oftentimes pared down to, or reconstructed as, the most essential, well-stated utterances.
- Use *concrete and specific detail* to represent your point of view and your situation. Avoid direct explanation in favor of concrete details that show – rather than tell – the reader what you mean. Attach your ideas to visible things. Dramatize your situation so that your readers experience it as though it were happening before their eyes, so that the readers become an observer at the scene. This is different than telling or narrating in which you offer a synopsis, in effect telling the reader about something which has happened to you rather than letting the reader be a witness to the event.
- Eventually, if not before you begin writing than before you finish, decide what type of “*voice*” you will be adopting. Decide, for example, if you will sound young or wise or ironic or bitter, angry or energetic. By doing so, you are not only selecting tone, but attitude. Remember: you become a *character* in the narrative!
- As you undertake this writing, separate the *creator from the editor*. In drafting, work toward that high-velocity writing discussed by Murray writes, so you can stay ahead of that internal censor, who could very well keep you from exploring intriguing memories, ideas, characters, plot possibilities, dialogues, sentence structures, word choices, and so on.
- Once you have a fairly complete draft, however, do take a look at the mechanical aspects – spelling, sentence and paragraph construction, punctuation, diction.
- The final (for now) draft should be 1000-1500 words in length, posted to google docs and labeled “your last name _ENG413 _Narrative.” Do not include a cover page, but do include a title that reflects the piece as a whole or even adds something significantly new. On the date the draft is due (Feb 17), bring 3-4 hard copies to class to share with the

members of your writing group and with me. On the date the final (for now) draft is due (Feb 24), post your narrative to google docs and share your document with me (and your group members, if you like) – **NOTE: This instruction may change; please stay posted!**

Procedure:

1. *Invent and inquire:* What vivid moments do you remember? Bad memories? Good memories? Puzzling memories? Can you pinpoint moments that have been turning points or especially significant for you? Why? How? Write in your exploratory writing forum about these and related topics to get your juices and memories flowing.
2. *Analyze genre:* What are the characteristics of the personal narrative genre? How does Lamott's book help you understand the genre? Find and post examples that serve as models for our narrative writing. Study several examples and consider "What makes a personal narrative effective?"
3. *Draft:* Drawing on your own invention work as well as the models we have considered, draft your "in the moment" narrative.
4. *Respond and Revise:* What can you learn by reviewing and responding to others' narrative drafts? How can you strengthen your writing through this process? Engage in on-line peer review with your colleagues. In dialogue with these responses, revise your narrative
5. *Go Public:* We will share drafts of our narratives with our writing groups and with our Tier 1 writing partners. If you like, distribute your narrative to other audiences beyond our class
6. *Situate your narrative:* While personal narratives tend to be expressive, they also sit within broader cultural and social dialogues. Can you read your narrative, or that of a colleague, as a cultural or social artifact? Why did you choose to tell this tale, in response to this prompt? Is your narrative a story you have told before? To whom? How, if at all, does its telling change in this new setting of English 413 and the audiences you are writing for? How did the instructor's prompt influence your choices as a narrator?
7. *Reflect:* What have you learned about how to write a personal narrative? What new puzzlements or questions have been raised? Consider how you might explain to your own students not just *what* this genre includes, but how they might approach it by describing and reflecting on your own writing process during this assignment.

Appendix B: Writing (first year writing) Sequence One Narrative Assignment

Writing 150 (first year writing) Sequence One: Cultural Narrative Project

Background: This semester you have been asked to select a silent, silenced, misrepresented or ignored culture to study for the duration of this course. In accordance with Michigan State University's Shared Learning Outcomes and the theme of this course, you will write, read, research and share this culture in many different ways. It is my hope that you will bring voice to your culture selection by tracing it through an assortment of writing projects.

Assignment: Project One gives you an opportunity to reflect on your individual experience(s) with the culture you selected to focus on this semester. Since the assignment is a narrative piece, you may consider telling a story that gives voice to your selected culture. In other words, how could you use this space to tell a story that (un)silences, (re)represents, or (un)ignores your culture of choice? At the same time, your narrative should move beyond simply telling a story or striving for self-expression; your narrative should also stress the value of this experience in relation to the culture you are studying, your life, and the lives of others.

Audience: For this project, you are writing for students who are studying at MSU to be English teachers. These pre-service teachers are interested in learning about how tier-one writing students use personal narratives to write about the cultures that they are part of. Your narrative will help these students generate an understanding of: 1) cultures that have been excluded from popular culture, 2) how to teach a personal narrative, and 3) how to teach the "writing process" in their future classes.

Requirements:

- 3-5 pages, Times New Roman, 12 pt font, double spaced, typed in Microsoft Word

Rubric: This project is worth 10% of your overall grade. The following criteria will be used to assess your final draft:

- Focus: staying on topic/ purpose visible (20 points)
- Development: details/ examples/ well supported (20 points)
- Arrangement: effective arrangement strategies/ make sense/ supports purpose and audience (15 points)
- Audience: audience awareness, ethos-pathos-logos, voice, tone (20 points)
- Language: free from surface errors/ sentence structure, (15 points)
- Overall: met the requirements of the assignment, including drafting, page requirements, footer, IRA activities, (10 points)

End Notes

1. For more information about the course conceptualization and organization, see wra150023.wordpress.com
2. We did not have permission to video or audio record the conversations, so we rely on our notes.
3. We do think practicing evaluation is necessary work for future writing teachers. Indeed, later in the semester, teacher candidates worked with April's rubric to assign grades to the final narratives of the first-year writers, an exercise the first year writers and April never saw.

About the Authors

Mary M. Juzwik (mmjuzwik@msu.edu) is Associate Professor in the department of Teacher Education at Michigan State University and co-editor of *Research in the Teaching of English*. She is studying moral, rhetorical, and dialogic dimensions of literate practices, pedagogies, and traditions surrounding the Bible in American evangelical sub-culture.

Anne Elrod Whitney (awhitney@psu.edu) is Associate Professor of Education at the Pennsylvania State University. Her research addresses how people use writing in living and learning, crossing disciplinary boundaries of composition studies, professional development, teacher education, and English language arts education.

April Baker-Bell (adbell@msu.edu) is a PhD candidate at Michigan State University in the Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures. Her research interests are situated in critical studies of African American Language at the intersections of literacy and pedagogy.

Amanda Smith (smit1552@msu.edu) is a PhD candidate in Curriculum, Instruction, and Teacher Education at Michigan State University. Her research considers the everyday language and literacy practices of youth with particular interest in affect, embodiment, and multimodality.