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ABSTRACT

In the struggle to find an acceptably academic voice that still felt personal, an instructor started thinking about what it would mean to say that academic writing is always autobiographical. Reading student work for how the autobiographical is presented in academic discourse, the instructor thought about how autobiographical writing could be used to help students find a way to enter academic conversations. Despite the prevalence of personal narratives as assigned writing in both literature and composition classes, personal writing continues to be thought of as ancillary, something students do before they get down to the business of real writing. In personal writing students may lack control, but they are using conventional narrative elements deliberately to walk the line between necessary revelation and protecting themselves from the unwanted scrutiny that classroom autobiography demands. Students' knowledge of one set of genre conventions can help them learn another set. Theorizing autobiography--asking questions about conventions position and construct subjects -makes sure that teachers are not simply teaching forms. In an introductory literature class, students were asked to pay attention to their writing processes and their own purpose for writing. Their first assignment consisted of writing a conventional personal narrative and then considering their narrative critically. In addition, students read and wrote various forms of non-standard academic writing. Though most students said that the non-standard assignments were the most wrote interesting, engaged essays and reported that these assignments helped them understand the choices that writers face. (Includes 9 notes; contains 5 references.) (NKA)

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# Reading Stories, Writing Lives:

## Theorizing Autobiographical Writing in the Classroom

When I started teaching, I thought teaching academic discourse was simply part of my job. I taught it as it had been taught to me, as the elite language of the university, and defined it as it had been defined for me; as prose that "appeal[ed] to reason [and] maintain[ed] a distanced and detached tone."[1] Familiar with this definition, my students understood it to mean that they were supposed to absent themselves from their writing. As one student wrote, "I am developing my skills of removing myself as the writer."[2] What I found was I was getting essays that lacked the interest and excitement I knew these students were bringing to their reading.

Struggling myself to find an acceptably academic voice that still felt like me, I started thinking about what it would mean to say that academic writing is always autobiographical. In my classes, I started reading student work for how the autobiographical is presented in academic discourse, and thinking about how autobiographical writing could be used to help students find a way to enter academic conversations.

Despite the prevalence of personal narratives as assigned writing in both literature and composition classroom, personal

writing continues to be thought of as ancillary, something students do before they get down to the business of real writing. As Gordon Harvey writes, "a personal/textual assignment could, in fact, help promote [critical] reading, if used as a self-challenging exercise *preliminary* to an essay" (646). Harvey's main problem with personal narratives written by students is one most of us have encountered at some time or another: He writes, "unless my experience is unique assignments asking students to write about a text by narrating something that happened in their own lives seem to generate unusually bad papers" (645).

I don't think Harvey's experience is unique, but the fault lies not with the students, but with our conception of and expectations for personal narratives. We are getting what we are asking for and what we expect. Harvey complains that the connections students make between their lives and texts are shallow, but in the absence of another context for such connections his students are reading mimetically, as they have been trained to do. The personal narrative for scholastic purposes has become a recognizable genre. In this guise, personal narratives are mini-versions of what Linda Peterson names as "the dominant form of the English autobiography: . . . a retrospective, developmental account of a progress, . . . moving through some sort of crisis toward a moment of self-understanding" (171).

Because our student's essays seem unsophisticated and predictable we tend to read them as unintentional representations

of their authors, a kind of "rubber stamping, in which a preexisting self is simply inked and them imprinted on the page."[3] I think it would be more useful to read the conventionality of student texts the way Lad Tobin suggests we read the pat ending. "Many students are not yet ready to deal with the ambiguity or unresolved tension that they themselves have identified, and these pat resolutions my provide them with a means of dealing (or not dealing with problems that are simply too painful."[4] Our students are working with the same codes we are, with the exception that what we find predictable, they think is expected. They may lack control, but they are using conventional narrative elements deliberately to walk the line between necessary revelation and protecting themselves from the unwanted scrutiny that classroom autobiography demands. As one of my students wrote, "I . . . wasn't sure how much of this experience I wanted to share with others who don't really know me."[5]

If autobiographical writing is not an unmediated, transparent act, nor is academic writing free of autobiography. As Donald Murray writes, "we are autobiographical in the way we write; my autobiography exists in the examples of writing I use . . . and in the text I weave around them" (67). We are autobiographical in the topics we take up and return to, in the writers who challenge, intrigue and baffle us. We may suppress the details of our particular circumstances, write from a position of assumed universality, but we remain particular

individuals who reveal ourselves through our interests and our blind spots.

Once we realize that academic discourse is as conventional, as predictable in its broad outlines, as student personal narratives, we can use our students' knowledge of one set of genre conventions to help them learn another set. Theorizing autobiography, asking questions about how these conventions position and construct subjects, about the kinds of subjects these conventions posit, makes sure that we are not simply teaching forms. This type of inquiry asks students to engage epistemological assumptions of various types of discourse. Rather than taking in the conventions of academic discourse as received wisdom, students can see conventions as contestable and contested.

I imagine that this type of theorizing can take many forms. It challenges us to think with our students about how they are constructed in and by their discourse, as well as how they are constructing those discourses. The approach that Lad Tobin suggests for young male writers can, I think, be extended to student writers in general. He writes, "what adolescent male students give us in first draft personal narratives is just the manifest content, the starting point, the conventional story. Our job is to help them to go further, by helping them to hear what they have not quite said, what is lurking in the background."[6]

Last semester in my introductory literature class, I focused

on these issues by asking my students to pay attention to their writing processes, and their own purposes for writing. For their first assignment I asked them to write a fairly conventional personal narrative, and then to consider their own narrative critically. The first part of the assignment read, "we are reading a number of coming of age stories. In these stories a character learns something that signals the 'end of childhood.' Write about an experience that did the same for you. What made it so meaningful? How and why did it effect you? How did it differ from the experience in the stories we have read? How was it similar to them?"

The second part asked them to reflect on the short stories we had been reading and consider "coming of age" stories as a genre. "What do coming of age stories have in common? What then can be said to be the 'rules' of the genre? Does your account of your experience conform to the 'rules' or break them? Was this on purpose? Why? What might be the effect of breaking the 'rules?'"

I did get a number of students who wrote, like this student, "my personal experience conforms to the rules. I didn't write it like that on purpose, that is just the way it happened."[7] But I also had a few that were able to reflect on the ways their writing was shaped by the conventions of the assignment, and generalize those questions to make connections to the literary texts we were reading. One wrote, "now that I reflect upon the reasoning behind my decision to recall my experiences the way I

did, I realize I was purposely conforming to the "rules" of the genre. . . . I cannot honestly say that sitting in that room was the only time when I felt like I was losing my childhood innocence. . . . What I am trying to convey is that we just don't wake up one say and decide 'This is going to be the day I become and adult.' Instead, it is a process that generally lasts several years and requires multiple events. . . . With this in mind, we can wonder why coming of age stories generally continue to center around one major event in a character's life. I believe one reason may be, simply, to keep the reader focused and interested in the story."[8]

In addition to teaching the thesis/support essay, I asked students to read and write various forms of non-standard academic writing. Using models like Joan Didion and Rachel DuPlessis, I asked them to think about not only what they thought those writers were trying to do, but to define for themselves the purposes of their non-standard essays. Though most of them said that the non-standard assignments were the most difficult, they also wrote interesting, engaged essays and reported that these assignments helped them understand the choices that writers face.

It was difficult to find a common language to talk about how the subject is constructed in and by discourse with students who had not yet been much exposed to debates about essentialism and the nature of the self, but focusing on the writing "I" seemed to give us a place to start. As we started to see stories not just as texts on the page, but also as the cultural narratives that

offer this or that option, while closing off a third, students were able to see the ways in which it is possible to intervene in discourse to create effective change.

In her process report, at the end of a persuasive essay that argued that AIDS literature serves an important and useful function, one student wrote, "where was I in this essay? As a college student, living in the world today, I hear about AIDS everyday. . . .I think everyone should be educated [about AIDS] because everyone is vulnerable. . . . I think that literature is a good place to convey that information." Later in a final reflective essay, she wrote, "for many people [AIDS] is a very unpleasant and scary topic. Most people don't really even want to talk about [it]. I used to be one of those people. The thought of AIDS, or me getting it was too scary to even think about. So I didn't for a long time. However this didn't make it go away. Right before I wrote my essay on AIDS I finally went for my HIV test. While doing research for the paper, I read a lot of unpleasant things but I also read a lot that made me hopeful. For me this paper was a lot more than something I had to write for English. A couple of days before I handed in my paper, I got back my negative HIV results."[9]

Of course, some of my students continued to write trite papers, but some of them came to see writing as a way of working through the complicated issues that pushing at the boundaries of conventions raises. Asking students to examine the cultural narratives that they use to construct their own stories is

difficult, but it has the benefit of letting students know they can construct themselves and "the real" differently.

1. Murray in Bridwell-Bowles, 351.
2. AM, Fall 1996.
3. Hite, xiii.
4. Tobin, 165.
5. MJH, Fall 1996.
6. Tobin, 170.
7. PG, Fall 1996.
8. CM, Fall 1996, emphasis in original.
9. PG, Fall 1996.

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