

Beyond the Bridge Metaphor: Rethinking the Place of the Literacy Narrative in the Basic Writing Curriculum

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*ABSTRACT: Critical analysis of the literacy narrative assignment within the context of the other genres in a basic writing course complicates understandings of the political import of the assignment. While several advocates of the literacy narrative have argued that it has the power of what Jean-François Lyotard has called *petits récits*, the authors argue that the relationship of the literacy narrative to other genres can also diminish the value of the literacy narrative and create what Lyotard has termed a “*differend*.” While still arguing for the value of the literacy narrative, authors present a narrative about curricular reform that demonstrates how students can learn to recognize how this genre circulates within the power/knowledge of academic writing. This critical reading of the literacy narrative genre leads the authors to call for a reconceptualization of the assignment as a productive “*conflict*” that can be utilized to reshape the entire curriculum of the course while still cultivating the skills of argumentation and analysis outlined in the course outcomes.*

KEYWORDS: basic writing; developmental writing; genre; literacy narrative; academic discourse; retention; differend

A recent discussion on the WPA-L Listserv asked “Is the Literacy Narrative Dead?” (July 25–28, 2013). The overwhelming majority of voices who joined the discussion corroborated other scholars who have argued that the literacy narrative is indeed alive and well, though perhaps in need of “updating” or “constructive criticism” (Haswell), relabeling (Macaulay) or at least reconceptualizing.¹ Gerald Nelms calls it a “learning reflection” (27 July) and others gave it similar naming variations, but the striking point is

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that almost everyone believed it has tremendous value in the college curriculum. Nelms argued that it is a useful pedagogical tool for the following three reasons: 1) it helps students “become more metacognitive about their learning”; 2) it helps them “integrate learning about writing into their prior knowledge about writing”; and 3) it is a “scaffolding device” to help students with cognitive overload (25 July). The liveliness of the discussion demonstrated the wide and still evolving (and we would argue relevant) uses of the literacy narrative in college writing courses; indeed, faculty use this loosely-defined genre in first-year writing (FYW), technical writing, general education, and pre-service English Education courses. Digital literacy narratives are frequently taught and students are increasingly comfortable with multimodal methods of producing texts. Students in other disciplines also produce literacy narratives (think medical narrative, math narrative, political narrative) to connect content to lived experiences.

As the comments on WPA-L verify, the literacy narrative genre is shaped by issues of institutional access, cognition, transfer, and the political import of the genre. These issues overlap, of course, but our experiences and research into our own curriculum point to a particular configuration of these issues: the threats to the genre’s political significance when it is utilized in classrooms that emphasize authorized and powerful genres of analysis and argumentation. This problem is particularly acute for basic writing courses like the one that we shall describe here, which is a mainstream FYW course (English 101) with a studio, rather than a non-degree credit bearing, or traditional remedial writing course. This course, English 101A, requires faculty to foster the identical analytical and argumentative writing skills of our mainstream course. In courses like these, the value of the literacy narrative can easily be lost when students move to assignments framed by more traditional academic genres. We can perceive this loss of political importance when the genre becomes, as it often does, treated as a bridge to academic writing, or worse as a means of “easing students into” academic writing.

We would agree with the consensus from the listserv discussion and other scholars around literacy narratives—they are useful, relevant, viable, fluid but in need of some critique. This is the story of how our institution revised its basic writing curriculum and the structure of the course, and in particular how the literacy narrative became a site of conflict that challenged us to think about its connection to the entire curriculum. Ultimately, we advocate that the literacy narrative be the focal point for the whole curriculum. In short, we complicated the notion of what a literacy narrative is and how it can be more useful in first-year and basic writing courses by considering

it as a “problem space” genre. Charles Bazerman argues that “Taking up the challenge of a genre casts you into the problem space and the typified structures and practices of the genre provide the means of solution. The greater the challenge of the solution, the greater the possibilities of cognitive growth occurring in the wake of the process of solution” (291). Thus, slowing down our curriculum by both restructuring the class (adding a 75-minute studio) along with revising the curriculum (complicating the sequence of assignments while focusing on the literacy narrative for the entire course) allows us to grapple with the disjuncture in a curriculum between a literacy narrative assignment and more traditional academic genre assignments.²

Bazerman’s description of the problem space of genre also encouraged us to ask two specific questions about the literacy narrative. First, *how accurately does our curriculum frame the problem to which the genre offers a typified response?* Second, *how might highlighting the curricular problem of the genre and working with students to develop critical responses to it increase possibilities for intellectual growth?* What we discovered was that the ‘problem space’ of the literacy narrative is one that can be more accurately described as constructed by the particular place that it occupies in the larger sequence of assignments in our classes, or in the practices that make up the activity system of our classrooms.

Before we elaborate on the curriculum, we need to describe the restructuring of the basic writing course. Essentially, we eliminated our basic writing course and created a regular composition class with a one-credit studio attached. The curriculum of the basic writing course modeled the goals and student learning outcomes of regular first-year writing; however, the assignment sequence was slightly different and one way we slowed the pace down was by adding the studio (taught by the same instructor). The results were dramatic: retention rates jumped from 46% to 81% over a five-year period after implementing the new model. These results have produced a high level of support from the English department and the college and university administration, and the studio model of the course recently won the Council on Basic Writing Award for Innovation. In addition to the studio model, we require a weekly teachers’ collaborative meeting led by an experienced instructor of basic writing. Pegeen Reichert, for example, writing on student retention, has noted that increased face time with faculty is a critical success factor for first-year students (668). Furthermore, Vincent Tinto notes “actions of faculty” are critical in enhancing student retention (5). We believe that the increased face-to-face time with faculty in our basic writing studio along with a revised curriculum that included a literacy narrative in addition to the regular analytical assignments of the course did

seem to accomplish this goal of increased persistence and retention. But while retention and continuation improved and while the new course was highly valued, our research also uncovered some deep ambivalences about the curriculum, particularly the literacy narrative assignment.

Although the efficacy of this curriculum for our institution is clearly supported by our research, when we looked back at interviews with faculty, we found that the numbers did not capture a central point of tension in our curriculum—the use of the literacy narrative as a bridge to genres of analytical writing. As with many freshman-year or basic writing courses, our curriculum begins with a literacy narrative that is followed by the first of several textual analysis assignments. Our curriculum development team proposed the literacy narrative assignment because, in theory, it provided an approachable transition to college writing. In this sense, the assignment reflected research on academic discourse, meta-cognition, and prior genre knowledge as necessary in students' transitions to college thinking and writing (Bartholomae 1985; Bazerman 2009; Perkins and Salomon 1988; Wardle 2007; Rounsaville, Goldberg, and Bawarshi 2008; Devitt 2007). Noting the importance of narrative genres as prior genres for students, we began by using the literacy narrative in a pretty traditional way—as a low stakes entry-level assignment for a basic writing class. In fact, it was this initial assumption that the literacy genre would bridge to academic genres that enabled us to realize that by slowing down the curriculum and spending an entire semester on one genre we could actually create the critical awareness necessary for writing in academic genres.

Literacy narratives are nothing new in writing curricula, particularly in basic writing circles, as evidenced by the recent WPA listserv discussions about its use. Nor is it our intention to argue that the genre in and of itself produces critical literacy. Rather, we want to argue that critical literacy develops through placing the literacy narrative within the context of academic genres that ultimately shape student writing in the academy. By slowing down our course, we were able to use the literacy narrative as a wedge, ultimately creating a space for our students in the world of academic literacies. We worked with students on the precarious position their literacy narratives occupy in academic writing and challenged them to develop genre knowledge and awareness by making connections (comparison, metaphors, analogies, classifications) from the literacy narratives to other academic genres through our sequence of assignments.

We will argue that our understanding of the literacy narrative genre takes place within an activity system and context of genres, and that our

students use this genre to develop critical understanding of how their narratives participate in these systems and contexts. Research on the function of genres in activity systems by Bazerman, Russell, Spinuzzi, and others has illustrated how genres play a significant role in both producing and reproducing activity systems. Describing activity systems as “ongoing, object-directed, historically conditioned, dialectically structured, tool-mediated human interaction” (510), David Russell illustrates the vital role of genre in activity systems. As Russell illustrates, “Genres are not merely texts that share some formal features; they are shared expectations among some group(s) of people. Genres are ways of recognizing and predicting how certain tools (including vocalizations and inscriptions), in certain typified—typical, reoccurring—conditions, may be used to help participants act together purposefully” (513). This understanding of genre as “shared expectations” leads us to consider the perception of the literacy narrative by both our students and faculty and to read the literacy narrative within the activity system of the FYW classroom and within the larger activity system of the university. To paraphrase Russell, we want our students to ask themselves “How can writing a literacy narrative (rather than some other kind of writing) help me gain access to this new system (college) that I want to be part of?”

The Literacy Narrative, the *Differend*, and the Problem with the Bridge Metaphor

Over twenty years ago, Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater talked about how students’ academic literacies “cannot be untied from a student’s overall literacy: the package comes complete” (xvi). She recognized that each individual student “evoke(s) a wide range of literacies to make meaning of their experiences” (xvi). Literacy narratives permit students to draw on their experiences in ways that lead to academic writing and thinking. Or so the argument goes. Mary Soliday talks about the plot of a literacy narrative as one that returns us to that place where we acquired “language, either spoken or written” (511). In this way the narrative serves as what Victor Turner calls “liminal crossings” between worlds, enabling writers to both “articulate the meanings and the consequences of their passages” (511). It is this act of interpretation, of being able to objectify one’s experience against the mettle of another’s (and of another genre even) that helps students gain agency in how language might work for them. For first-year college students, the literacy narrative assignment gives them a real opportunity to write and reflect and compare their own literacy experiences in a new domain.

Our students' literacy narratives, as well as those models we bring into the classroom, are not innocent by any means. They can serve to be transformative or even transcendental, but they can also exacerbate existing deficit beliefs about education and self-worth. In our curriculum, making the literacy narrative the focus of the course gives us an opportunity (more time) to help students recover from such possible losses of innocence that might occur, thus coming to a more grounded knowledge of how critical literacy might work for them. Laurel Johnson Black argues that if students feel the power of "that movement forward" in their own literacy narratives, they might come to "feel the power of the turning concept, the academic idea" (25). She directly links the personal agency of the literacy narrative to academic thinking.

Our proposals for curriculum reform began with the recognition that our understanding of the literacy narrative as a bridge to academic writing notion not only did *not* link or bridge to the next assignment but in fact, it often interfered with the academic writing that students were expected to do. We knew there were potential traps in romanticizing a literacy narrative as a way of easing at-risk students into college—giving them a chance to tell their stories, linking those stories to a larger context, and so on, and then assuming they would just slide right into academic writing with few adjustments. Indeed, others have cautioned about some of the potential problems with literacy narratives in college writing. Kara Poe Alexander, for example, has examined and challenged the literacy narrative because it can reify dominant archetypes in the story. The master narrative (success story), Alexander argues, has a common archetypal plot: follows conventional patterns of narration, corresponds to prevailing cultural representations of literacy, helps organize reality, and shapes our understanding of ourselves (609). These "success stories" romanticize literacy or worse, "paint it as pragmatic and utilitarian, a means to economic, cultural, social, and political success" (609). When students write what Jean-François Lyotard would call *petits récits* or little narratives, Alexander argues that these tend to be unsanctioned, artistic, imaginative, and concrete. She argues that our very assignments may lead students toward the archetype rather than toward the smaller more significant and revealing little narrative.

Writing teachers are thus charged with problematizing that ubiquitous "master" narrative that students lean into and also to add nuance to what is perceived as a pretty straightforward assignment. In the first iteration of our new basic writing course, for example, students often told stories of "being saved by one great teacher or coach or family member or counselor." They

went on a quest, faced obstacles, and one day “saw the light” because of “X” and now they are here, living (hopefully) “happily ever after.” Sometimes the quest was given gravitas by a tragic event (car accident, shooting, death of friend or family member, etc.) making the arrival at college a more dramatic accomplishment and the apex of literacy achievement. We were discouraged by the preponderance of “unexamined” narratives as they tended to lack any nuance or critical reflection. Furthermore, where do you go from there?

We began to think of first-year college students as not only entering a new domain of social learning but also a new “cognitive apprenticeship” where previous learning could “become integrated with other existing or parallel developed functional systems to create a new functional system” (Bazerman 290). Now we wanted to revise the curriculum so that learning critical analysis on a personal and familiar genre—a narrative about one’s own experiences—had the potential to both increase learning and to internalize such learning in a way that transfers to other domains (the next composition course or writing task in college). Like Alexander, we began with the premise that literacy narratives allow students to harness the power of the *petit récit* and challenge the discourses of academic power that would exclude them from the university. In other words, if we could move students away from the “master narrative” trajectory that they seemed to navigate toward and encourage them to be more “unsanctioned, artistic, imaginative, and concrete” (Alexander 609), we could open up a problem space and truly use the literacy narrative as a “cognitive apprenticeship” (Bazerman 290).

As we developed and taught our curriculum, we realized that the literacy narrative itself was not our only problem. We next witnessed students encounter significant difficulties when they moved from the literacy narrative to the textual analysis assignments, and we observed instructors begin to question the role of the literacy narrative in our English 101A curriculum. What we learned was *the assignment that we considered the least difficult was actually the most challenging to teach effectively and created the most difficult “problem space” in the class*. This challenge came not from the assignment itself but from the gap in the sequence between this assignment and the analytical genres of the curriculum that followed it in our sequence of assignments. Students were asked to move from the personal but critical voice of their literacy narratives to assignments that were almost wholly text-focused, such as textual and contextual analysis assignments that develop an interpretive claim rather than an argument grounded in experience. This assignment, which had been designed to create a bridge to academic writing, actually ended up constituting a gap for quite a few faculty.

The problem space of the literacy narrative assignment is most clearly perceived when we look at its relationship to the genres that surround it. Within a First-Year Writing (FYW) classroom focused on analytical writing, a literacy narrative can very quickly be perceived as lacking the power or value of other genres. This is not to suggest that literacy narratives truly lack power, but to point to the material and symbolic constraints that shape both their circulation and their linkage to other genres of academic writing. Important national projects, such as Cynthia Selfe's *Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives* and the multi-lingual literacy narrative collection at DePaul University's *University Center for Writing Based Learning* (UCWbL), illustrate that the power of literacy narratives is constrained and fostered by the spaces of their circulation and reception. Writing researchers such as Selfe have granted the literacy narratives of a varied group of students, citizens, and intellectuals such a space, a space that only until recently has been reserved for the literacy narratives of high-profile intellectuals. Such projects illustrate the value of writing to our students, but also illustrate how writing gets "valued" through processes of circulation and representation.

Our experience with our curriculum project led us to consider how the literacy narratives of our students can challenge power and grant access to academic discourse by considering another, central concept from Lyotard: the *differend*. Lyotard defines a "differend" as

a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments. . . . Damages result from an injury which is inflicted upon the rules of a genre of discourse but which is reparable according to those rules. *A wrong results from the fact that the rules of the genre of discourse by which one judges are not those of the judged genre or genres of discourse.* (xi, italics added)

While our students do not occupy as juridical of a space as the subjects of Lyotard's analysis, his description of how genres are judged resonates with our discussion of student literacy narratives. Lyotard's understanding of a "wrong" is useful here as it illustrates the role of value and hierarchy in contexts of genre. For Lyotard, the force of genre lies in its ability to shape our ends and objectives: "We believe that we want to persuade, to seduce, to convince, to be upright, to cause to believe, or to cause to question, but this is because a genre of discourse, whether dialectical, erotic, didactic, ethical, rhetorical, or 'ironic,' imposes its mode of linking onto 'our' phrase and

onto ‘us’” (136). Genre is therefore hegemonic, and Lyotard describes “hegemonies of genre” (141) as spaces of agonistic conflict where genres “fight over modes of linking” (141). However, he also notes that the hegemony of genre presents possibilities for addressing differends and articulating other possibilities through other genres.

Lyotard’s argument is useful for understanding the relationships of value that shape genres within activity systems and the conflicts of value which can arise when particular genres exercise their hegemony. As students and instructors in our course grappled with how literacy narratives and the analytical genres of textual and contextual analysis are valued, we began to perceive the literacy narrative as a site of conflict, or a *differend*. One faculty member expressed this differend perfectly when she worried that “there’s too much focus on narrative writing only, especially when they’ll be expected to work in different forms and genres.” For example, the perception of the literacy narrative as not being “academic” or as lacking academic rigor illustrates, for us, the possibility of producing such a wrong. In this case, the literacy narrative is not only judged by the rules of another genre, but is given value in a discourse about academic writing that is not accessible to students. To address this differend requires developing opportunities for students to “link” (29) the literacy narrative to their work in other academic genres and use their literacy narratives to critically examine and even challenge academic discourse.

In addition to some of our faculty’s uneasiness, we also harbored our own fears that students who expressed their literacy experiences vividly in their literacy narratives might experience a diminished communicative agency when it came time to write a textual analysis. In this important sense, our initial experiences with the course exhibited an important differend, one where students needed to link the language and rhetorical skill of their literacy narratives to analytical genres that ran the risk of silencing them. This silencing could be considered “damages” incurred as a result of a wrong committed, to use Lyotard’s language. The possibility existed that students in our course could move from an early recognition of their literacy and agency only to find in the next paper that it is this very type of literacy and rhetorical agency that is not highly valued in the academy.

The assignment sequence below illustrates the differend our instructors were experiencing.

- **Literacy Narrative**—reconsideration of familiar “stories” about what literacy is and how it works—analysis of one’s literacy narrative and

how that was shaped by literary, textual, cultural factors

- **Textual Analysis**—analysis of writer’s rhetorical strategies (literary, textual, cultural factors that shape a text) for a particular audience and purpose
- **Text in Context Analysis**—focus on the text and its relationship to a larger context (i.e., author’s biography, historical or cultural situation surrounding the text, a particular theoretical approach such as feminism or psychoanalysis, the literary tradition to which the text belongs). Focused research required.
- **Revision and Reflection**: students revise one analytical essay and write a cover essay that explains how they have improved their essay through the revision process.

The previous curriculum above illustrates an approach taken by most of our instructors. Here, the literacy narrative was conceived as a “bridge” between the prior genre knowledge of our incoming students and the genres of analytical writing. The course began with the literacy narrative, but then moved directly into the same assignments of textual analysis that are used in our regular composition course.

Because this curriculum utilized the exact sequence of assignments of our mainstream English 101, with the exception of the literacy narrative assignment, it created a strong sense of curricular coherence between the two courses. However, we noticed during faculty interviews that the role of the literacy narrative in the course was a continual topic of conversation, and our interviews compelled us to revisit the curriculum. Genuine contention over the literacy narrative indicated that the relationship between the literacy narrative and these genres seemed incommensurable, and created the perception that the literacy narrative served as a way to ease students into academic writing or cultivate their attitude towards writing. In other words, the literacy narrative was preparatory to the work of academic analysis. We found that several faculty expressed confusion about “bridging the narrative and the analysis essay” and several echoed the sentiment of one faculty member who urged, “cut literacy narrative and focus on analysis and comprehension.” Others, however, noted the power of the literacy narrative as a bridge assignment. As one faculty member expressed it, “The narrative essay works as a boost of confidence in their writing skills and their worth. So starting with analysis might crash their spirits right from the start.” These differing views illustrate the perceived values of literacy narratives and how their place within a sequence of assignments affects this value. To further com-

plicate matters, when students were asked directly about the “helpfulness of literacy narrative assignment to future writing,” 80% of those surveyed rated the assignment seven on a scale of one to ten, with ten indicating “Strongly Agree.” Slowing down our curriculum was definitely working, but the literacy narrative assignment had created a pedagogical conflict that challenged the coherence of our curriculum.

In sum, the *wrong* suffered by students was that the idiom (Lyotard’s language) that regulates this conflict was not the one the students used or knew. They were victims because the dominant genre of academic discourse was what “addressees” (university faculty and even FYW teachers) valued while we (the basic writing curriculum developers) valorized this literacy narrative idiom. The linkages between the literary narrative and academic writing became “unsuitable” or wrong. *Damages* occurred when the hegemony of one idiom invalidated or denied that of another (our students’ literacy narratives). What was at stake was “to bear witness to differences” by finding idioms for them (Lyotard 13). And this led us to rethink the place of the literacy narrative in our curriculum.

The Case for Keeping the Literacy Narrative in English 101A

Despite the difficulties encountered when faculty moved from the literacy narrative to the first analytical writing assignment, we saw significant value in continuing to assign a literacy narrative for our developmental writing students. The basic writing teachers met weekly for their teachers’ collaborative meetings and continued to discuss the value and problems with the literacy narrative. When these instructors worked with students on developing their literacy narratives and analyzed the literacy narratives written in their own and each other’s classrooms, we continued to see their efficacy in enabling students to think critically about accessing academic discourse and to develop a “rhetorical stance” (Booth 141) towards the work of the course. The following section highlights some of the patterns we found in the students’ literacy narratives and reflections on the assignment that encouraged us to argue for a larger revision of the course.³ Reading through students’ writing, we used an inductive methodology or grounded research method in which we devised the following categories or themes from the emerging patterns in the students’ writing. In sum, we read and coded for dominant and recurring ideas/themes, using a sort of conceptual sorting based on the frequency of the patterns. We found five commonplace rhetorical moves that reaffirmed our use of the assignment, while challenging

us to rethink how the assignment was sequenced, and how we might use the literacy assignment in a larger way.

i. Meta-reflection on one's own literacy. Almost all writing classes ask students to reflect on their writing: What did you change? How did you change “x?” Why? Show me....and so on. Kathleen Yancey argues that reflection is a form of theorizing that “doesn’t occur naturally to most learners...[as such] it requires structure, situatedness, reply, engagement” (19). In the 101A course, students write a literacy narrative and then revise it with this sort of meta-reflection incorporated (bold print, font changes, footnotes – choose your technology) into the paper. One student who was writing about the power of a word (in this case the “N word”), relates a story in which someone calls his uncle “nigga” in his presence. His literacy narrative, then, traces the historical and cultural uses of this word and how he felt its use (the word “nigga”) affected the people in his presence. He adds this sentence in his revised literacy narrative: “In my mind I thought it would be okay to say [the word ‘nigga’] after Alex [a classmate] said all black people had the right to say the “N word.”” In explaining this revision, he defends adding this sentence because “it completes my initial thoughts in a sentence...reminds readers where I got my information...and helped me understand that literacy is something that happens progressively and is changed by interpretation and false accusations.” He goes on to compare the casual use of the “N word” to talking about God in class. His analogy is that both words (God and nigga) provoke emotional responses yet “allow readers the option of understanding that words can be significant in more ways than one.” He continues about how he has learned to “seek literacy in our everyday lives.”

What seems significant about this example is the depth of analysis about one's own literacy events and one's own writing. As the student's reflection indicated, the student linked literacy to rhetorical context and connected a personal literacy experience to a “socio-literate” context (Johns 20). By reflecting on the power of his rhetorical choices to shape an audience's reaction and fulfill a particular purpose within a particular context, the student illustrated a deepening understanding of the analytical practices of our courses. In our regular composition classes there are required reflective activities and the requisite peer response. But because the pace of the class is so much faster, we do not pause to fully explore (or even teach) some of the revisions. Such revisions are expected, though often accomplished in a fairly superficial way. There may be “structure, situatedness, reply, engagement” as Yancey requires, but in 101A the pace slows. There is more repetition, more time on all aspects of reflection. Because we can use the full 75-minute studios to

devote to unpacking these literacy events in local and global ways, it is not unusual for students to write more about their revisions and to relate those to other contexts. For example, this student added the above-cited 24-word sentence and then commented on three aspects of that change in three sentences and sixty words. Because a significant amount of the course is spent on reading one's own literacy events against the grain and contextualizing them with the experiences of others (in class and with published authors), students build cumulatively on this ability to sustain reflection and to articulate it clearly. A student slows down and re-reflects because there is more time to think and to let ideas of change percolate. In the process, students learn to learn, become more self-aware, and demonstrate in concrete ways that they can change the way they do things. The student in this scenario experienced a cognitive apprenticeship by being cast into the "problem space" of the genre and the challenge of the solution was substantial enough to also produce cognitive growth.

2. Becoming critically aware of language. A student whose father is an English teacher bemoaned his childhood because he hated to read and argued with his father constantly. When he did finally "take to reading" through Calvin and Hobbes comics, he moved on to Hawthorne, Steinbeck, and others. And he discovered that "as I read more and more I came across quotes, sentences, paragraphs, excerpts, and novels that inspired me and morphed the way I viewed the world. I envied the authors of these works of art." He began to use the "structure and style of the [authors'] essays....to come up with my own ideas." He discovered that "it was too hard to write about something you didn't care for." In the process of this discovery, he came to value writing outside of the classroom as a way to improve writing in the classroom. This young man was more eloquent than many, but he captured the feelings shared by most students that "extraneous wording" does not help, "that I have flaws in his writing, and that practice is critical to improving one's writing." Like the student who looked at the effect of the word "nigga" on himself and his family, this student came to value the right word at the right time and to examine the effects of language on his audience. As the student writing on the "N word" wrote, "I believe the "N word" upholds various meanings, and we have to know when and where it is appropriate."

Another student wrote that "going over your words once more, I have come to realize while revising my literacy narrative that when I analyze topics that I have experienced and lived through, I am able to bring a whole new meaning to the table when expressing my thoughts and when scrutinizing details." She believes this "enables me to bring a whole new message to my

essay. It is solely for this reason that I find my voice, enveloping a sense of critical observations and opinions.” She credits this “insight” to what enables her to bring analysis to her story...and by “increasing analysis in my essay, I managed to express further, all the things I was thinking while I executed the actions I did.” Like the student who understood the problems with “extraneous wording,” so too this student recognizes that analysis combined with narrative is a sort of synergy that produces deeper insights. Students, in this sense, begin with a self-concept as a “student” and are encouraged to re-envision themselves as writers.

3. Reconsideration of value of journals. Many of the students had kept journals as teenagers, but rarely had they used these journals to really clarify their ideas and experiences. Most students’ literacy narratives talked about journal writing as a sort of youthful diary—a place where they wrote about their friends, love lives, car accidents. But they did not realize until they began revising these journals and writing about the journals that they actually had been using journal writing as a way of clarifying feelings. Now they began to journal as a way of practicing a chemistry lab write up or trying out some opinions prior to a class discussion. As one student wrote, “the more I wrote the easier it got. I was getting comfortable with writing everything that came to my mind...now, when I go to do other forms of writing, it is easier to write a first draft because I have become comfortable with expressing my thoughts and opinions through writing.” Talking about the value of journaling as if it is a new or “significant truth” is not our intention. It reminds us of John Schilb’s caveat to those of us in the field to not argue that what is already a commonplace is somehow new or different if it is not—particularly if it is not the “essays’ main thesis” but rather a secondary one. “Calling it a truism can save time” (297-8). So while we are not arguing that journaling is new or controversial, we are corroborating this truism. Journaling is a valued practice in the field of composition studies. It is not the main point or most significant commonplace we discovered. But it is always reassuring to have students claim yet again the power of journaling in many aspects of their academic lives. That said, this is the most orthodox of our “commonplaces.”

4. Pragmatic consequences of not being able to write well. Perhaps it comes as no surprise that almost none of the students in English 101A are English majors. They are comfortable telling us that they “do not write well.” Some are math and science majors, thinking they will not have to write. Imagine their surprise when they find out they still have to produce writing in a genre (the lab report, for example) that they do not think of as writing (that would be the “essay” or “research paper”). Some students are

nontraditional students returning to school. One student's experience was particularly dramatic—he enlisted in the Navy because he could not write well. Since English was his second language, he always felt he was a weak writer. In the Navy, his division officer asked him to write his “own evaluation” for a promotion. He carefully followed the format, describing “how good of a sailor I am.” He “read the outline...seeing what I needed to be done [sic].” As he went through the list of traits, he wrote a brief explanation of each trait he possessed. He did not get the promotion because, he was told, the other sailor competing with him wrote better. After his stint in the Navy, he returned to college and wrote “I know now what writing can accomplish for me and where it can take me in life.” Most students just talk about struggles in other classes at our university. But occasionally a student like this one tells a more dramatic tale of loss, of status, and of financial consequences. The very foundation of the literacy narrative is to disrupt something that is taken for granted: one's own relationship with literacy events. Most students know on some level that they have suffered some consequences because of their struggles with writing. But few of them have interrogated such a premise for an entire semester. So the semester long focus on one's own literacy events and on how to contextualize them within a larger context tends to produce more than a few “aha” moments. In this case of this former Navy recruit, the consequences take a turn toward the dramatic. In most students' cases they are less portentous.

5. Integration of sources (one or more secondary texts) into one's own literacy narrative to elaborate on the experience, extend an argument, validate a point. This is probably the most useful part of the literacy narrative in terms of development of academic skills that will transfer to a new situation in the academy. Students often read a text like Jimmy Santiago Baca's “Coming into Language.” One student who writes that he comes from a privileged background argues for why in spite of the differences between his life and Baca's there is much to learn from him. He relates his own stress in performing “writing” to how Baca felt. The majority of the students manage to find significant connections between their own literacy experiences and the authors they read who are writing about writing. We use literacy narratives like Baca's and also texts like *American History X* (film), Robert Heilbroner's “Don't Let Stereotypes Warp Your Judgment,” and Sam Keen's *Your Mythological Journey: Finding Meaning in Your Life Through Myth and Storytelling*. Students read such narratives with an eye not only towards textual analysis, but also as a site of comparative practice. In this sense, students analyze texts like Baca's from their perspective as writers,

thinking through their own choices while analyzing the narrative choices in the essay. Students slip with ease into finding compelling ways to use other voices to do what we want all our students to do when they bring outside experts into their papers: they elaborate, validate, extend, and complicate their arguments. Because they do this, they are prepared for the next course where research may be a main focus.

The commonplaces that we found in literacy narratives and reflections confirmed our theoretical rationale for beginning our course with the assignment. These patterns of student response illustrate for us the value of the literacy analysis assignment in promoting the meta-cognitive knowledge of the writing process that we see as a central outcome of our course. But our experience also underscores the value of indirect measures of program assessment—such as our instructor interviews and student surveys—for deepening our understanding of the local conflicts that occur within our curriculum. What we discovered in examining this curricular conflict (the abrupt transition or rupture in moving directly from a literacy narrative to academic writing) was that there was value to the literacy narrative as a concrete, accessible paradigm of access to academic discourse, and that the assignment could allow us to examine this conflict with our students in meaningful ways. We looked back upon Bazerman’s understanding of genre as a “problem space” and his contention that the greater the problem of negotiating this space “the greater the possibilities of cognitive growth occurring in the wake of the process of solution” (291). Our initial question of “bridging” from the literacy analysis to textual analysis assignments transformed into a question both more applicable to our students’ lives and more sophisticated: how might we enable our students to understand how their own texts, and the literacy narrative in particular, come to be valued? We went, as we shall discuss below, from thinking of the literacy analysis as a bridge to thinking about how we might frame the entire curriculum around this assignment.

Re-Valuing the Literacy Narrative in English 101A

As Elizabeth Wardle found in her longitudinal study of transfer in FYC,⁴ “*meta-awareness about writing, language, and rhetorical strategies* in FYC may be the most important ability our courses can cultivate” (“Understanding” 82). Wardle suggests that “rhetorical analyses of various types of texts across the university” and “auto-ethnographies of their own reading and writing habits” (82) foster students’ meta-cognitive reflection. Wardle’s well-known study “Mutt-Genres’ and Goal of FYC,” further substantiates this claim by

pointing to the thin correspondence between classroom genres in FYC and the disciplinary genres students encounter beyond FYC. For Wardle, students often write “mutt genres”: “genres that do not respond to rhetorical situations requiring communication in order to accomplish a purpose that is meaningful to the author” (777). The recognition that our classroom genres are often “mutt genres” that do not promote high-road transfer challenges writing teachers to shift their content of their classrooms so that they are “about writing” rather than “how to write” (784). In our case, we found that the value of the literacy narrative lies in its ability to serve as the basis for a course “about writing,” but that this value depends upon the hierarchy of the literacy narrative in the context of genres that are utilized in the classroom. As we analyzed our qualitative data from our study of English 101A, we began noticing that the literacy narrative challenged our faculty to make their courses “about writing” initially, but shifted in the next assignment to the role of teaching “how to write” a textual analysis and often never revisited the literacy narrative. The result was, for several of our faculty, the perception of the literacy narrative as bridge, or as a means of “easing into” academic writing.

Our analysis of the literacy narrative assignment prompt convinced us of the social value and action of the genre. The impetus for the circulation of the text is embodied in the genre itself. Students are asked to place their literacy experience within a social or cultural context and to develop a thesis that draws out both the consequences of this context for their literacy and the role their literacy can play in addressing this context. Within the conventions of this genre, the depiction of experience and reflective reasoning serve as evidence to support this thesis, and the prompt encourages the function of representing oneself as a writer because or in spite of the cultural contingencies that have shaped one’s literacy. By comparison, the social function of the textual analysis assignment, the second in the sequence of assignments in our traditional 101A classrooms, manifests itself as interpretive and disciplinary. The prompt calls for an analytical thesis that presumes that the claim is the author’s and does not call for or privilege personal experience. Evidence from the experiential process of reading is not valued, but evidence in the form of quotations and discussions of details of the text are. In addition, the organizational conventions of the essay are structured around distinct points of evidence that support the analytical thesis rather than around narrative events. Topic sentences, for example, present particular points that support and explore the thesis rather than introducing new points in the narrative experience.

In an important sense, the problem space of the literacy narrative is one that we were able to perceive most clearly as students and faculty both made the transition to the textual analysis assignment that followed in the course sequence. To introduce the literacy narrative to our sequence of assignments means critically thinking through our students' experiential socialization through using the genres. We came to our conclusions that bridging the gap between the different rhetorical contexts involves *reframing* how literacy narratives are taught within sequences of assignments. Through analyzing our curriculum, we have come to the following recommendations for recognizing literacy narratives as a "problem-space" genre and rethinking the place of the literacy narrative in the writing curriculum.

First, *assigning a literacy narrative does not create an easily recognizable or negotiable bridge between students' prior genre knowledge and the academic genres of FYC*. We have become wary of the bridge metaphor, as it sets up the false expectation in our faculty that students easily move from the literacy narrative to the other genres in our courses. In fact, assigning a literacy narrative can heighten students' awareness of barriers to academic access rather than facilitate an easy transition. Bridging between the literacy narrative and the analytical and argumentative genres of FYC requires working with students to negotiate differences in voice, organization, and style. In addition, it requires that instructors possess the ability to speak meaningfully about the relationship between the literacy narrative and the set of analytical or argumentative genres students encounter throughout the rest of the course. At the programmatic level, this means that placing a literacy narrative on a required or recommended departmental syllabus requires faculty training and pedagogical resources.

Second, *literacy narratives do not function well as "add-on" or "optional" assignments for already developed curricula, as they radically change the perceived continuity between assignments*. To attach the literacy narrative as an additional assignment to an established course might very well create intense difficulties for faculty and students. The theorization of the literacy narrative as a genre that promotes student agency and meta-cognition makes its adoption as an assignment tempting, but adopting it singly, without reconceiving the additional assignments in the course can create confusion and resentment towards the assignment by both faculty and students. In particular, designating the literacy narrative as "optional" could extend faculty perceptions of it as being of lesser value and rigor than the more recognized genres of analytical or argumentative writing. Assigning the literacy narrative as an add-on assignment can create significant problems for Writing Program Ad-

ministrators in terms of curricular coherence, as some well-meaning faculty will opt out of the assignment because they feel it has little to do with the genres and standards of academic writing. As the comments from our own faculty interviews revealed, faculty perception of the purpose and scope of the literacy narrative plays a direct role in whether or not the literacy narrative is presented to students as an easy bridge into the “more important” work of academic analysis and argument or as a significant part of the curriculum. Seeking to mitigate these feelings by making the assignment optional does not change this perception, but in many ways simply makes introducing a literacy narrative into the curriculum unwise, as it highlights its subordinate status to faculty.

Third, *while meta-awareness of writing and increased rhetorical agency are hallmarks of the literacy narrative assignment, they can be diminished by the rhetorical messages our assignment sequences send to students.* The differences between the functions, conventions, and contexts of the literacy narrative and the analytical and argumentative assignments that surround it challenge faculty to pay attention to how students perceive the literacy narrative’s relationship to other assignments in the course. Placing the literacy narrative in the context of three analytical assignments, without exploring its relationship to them, can send a clear message to students about the place of the literacy narrative within the hierarchy of value of academic genres. When placed first in the sequence of assignments, for example, students could perceive the literacy narrative as an “easy first assignment” that prepares them for the “real” or “valued” writing of the course. But when they have to shift abruptly to an academic textual analysis, students may struggle with what counts as evidence, how to distance themselves from a text and “feign” objectivity, how to let go of the sense that their own experiences are important and relevant only sometimes, or that they can use personal experience to enliven a textual interpretation, and finally, that they have been somehow “misled” by the relative comfort of telling their literacy stories only to find out that they have little value or use in college writing.

A Re-Envisioned Curriculum

In important ways, the sequential relationship between the literacy analysis and the textual analyses of our course have led us to reconceive our developmental writing course as a course “about writing.” From our initial understanding of the literacy narrative as a first bridge to academic literacy, we have moved towards an understanding of the assignment as a framework

for the issues of literacy, access, and genre that shape our entire curriculum. In the space remaining, we will attempt to provide an overview of our current proposals for curricular revision. In contrast to our previous curriculum, which moves from the literacy narrative to the analysis of literary and rhetorical texts, we argue for the efficacy of a process-portfolio model based on the following assignment sequence:⁵

- **Literacy Narrative:** follows our previous assignment, but includes more explicit analysis of the audiences, purposes, and contexts of students' literacy narratives.
- **Rhetorical Analysis of Published Literacy Narrative:** analysis of the rhetorical and literary strategies of a published literacy narrative that asks students to develop an analytical claim concerning why and how the literacy narrative might be valued by specific audiences.
- **Contextual Analysis of Published Literacy Narrative:** analysis of a published literacy narrative through the cultural lens provided by texts that address the cultural context and situation of the published literacy narrative.
- **Revision of Literacy Narrative:** revision of student's literacy narrative that applies selected strategies learned through analyzing published literacy narratives. This project asks students to also locate a concrete audience for the literacy narrative and to employ rhetorical strategies that speak to the specific context of this audience.
- **Reflective Essay:** semester reflection that asks students to reflect upon how their work in the course, and their vision and revision of their literacy narratives, speaks to the outcomes of the course.

It seems obvious in hindsight that the sequence needed to change. And considering the slow awakening, the gradual discussions of revision, these proposals are consistent with both of our understandings of how Writing Programs should pursue change—err on the side of conservatism. When you change a curriculum you change the teacher training, the web site and resources that accompany it, the textbooks, and articulation between courses. When a university teaches thousands of students in FYW each year, the problems of too rapid curricular changes have escalating effects. So this was a big moment for us—to re-envision a new curriculum.

Students can create a portfolio that builds upon the initial meta-awareness of literacy that they develop through the literacy narrative with each additional assignment. This could be achieved by beginning with a student

literacy narrative that was heavily revised and adapted at the end of the course sequence, after students have developed both rhetorical and contextual analyses of published literacy analyses. In the first unit of this sequence, students begin by developing their own literacy narratives individually and in workshops. At this initial stage, students encounter published literacy narratives and those available through institutional archives as examples, but not as texts to be analyzed. Faculty work with students on developing a controlling idea, structuring their narrative, and balancing meta-reflective discourse about their reading and writing experiences with evidence from their experiences. Throughout this process, students develop a vocabulary of techniques and rhetorical strategies that help students name the rhetorical moves they are making in their narratives.

The meta-awareness of writing and reading generated in this first unit sets the stage for the next two assignments, which introduce students to rhetorical and contextual analysis. These assignments meet the course outcome of close analysis of textual and contextual strategies, but they maintain different genre functions. Students develop a rhetorical and contextual analysis of published literacy narratives and write in an analytical genre, but two key elements of these assignments help ensure a sense of continuity from the literacy analysis. First, each assignment is framed as an opportunity to explore how and why writers convey their literacy experiences, how their narratives are valued by different audiences and in different contexts, and how their narratives address specific cultural ideologies and exigencies.

Second, throughout the process of developing these analyses, students are given the opportunity to write short reflections about the rhetorical strategies and rhetorical situations of the published literacy narratives and their own literacy narratives. During the contextual analysis unit, for example, students might be encouraged to locate the “representative anecdote” (Burke 59) of the narrative and explore its relationship to the cultural context of the narrative and then reflect upon their own “representative anecdote” and cultural context. A student writing a contextual analysis of Gerald Graff’s “On Disliking Books at an Early Age” might analyze the negative role that schooling plays in Graff’s literacy narrative in their contextual analysis and then reflect upon how their own relationship to educational institutions has played both positive and negative roles on the development of their literacy.

Through the process of developing a portfolio around their literacy narratives, students begin to see the relationship between the literacy narrative and the analytical genres of the course as complementary rather than ancillary. This perception can be strengthened by asking students to

revise their literacy narratives after developing the skills of rhetorical and contextual analysis in the previous two units. The portfolio asks students to consistently reflect upon the relationship of the texts they are analyzing and their literacy narrative, so in a sense students have been readying themselves to revise their literacy narrative throughout the course. To foster their critical literacy further, students should be challenged to revise and adapt their literacy narrative for a specific audience. Students are encouraged to seek out audiences both within and outside of the university for their literacy narratives, and to think critically about the narrative and rhetorical strategies necessary to illustrate the value of their experiences.

Beyond the Bridge

While the literacy narrative is often characterized as promoting student engagement and agency, our experience assigning the literacy narrative in our English 101A course makes us wary of the bridge metaphor often used to describe it. Like all genres, the literacy narrative gains its power and meaning from its relationship to other genres and the hierarchies of value that shape particular contexts of writing. Writing a text about oneself (the familiar part) and turning it into a sophisticated critical analysis is a problem-solving skill that transports to other areas of learning. Whether we talk about familiar genres or about cognitive learning leading to new development, we have the power and the ability to design curriculum that enhances transfer. Edgington, Tucker, Ware, and Huot argue that this is the kind of power that WPAs have the choice to engage in—the power to implement and design solutions that focus on the “integrity of the learning situation” (73).

The price of remediation is not cheap—nor does it come without risks. Our university had to reduce class size from 25 to 22 for this basic writing course and then assign an instructor to teach 22 students a semester with 11 of them in one studio and 11 in the other studio. The workload reduction is from two sections/6 credits/50 students to one section/4 credits/22 students with two studios (same 22 students just meeting them in different configurations over the week). Because this course structure was so expensive, and because it essentially replaced a traditional remedial course with a studio session, it was a risky venture for our program, one that we needed to show worked pedagogically and in terms of student retention. One could argue that this is really the story of how our institution invested more intellectual and financial resources in developmental writing, what that investment

looked like at the beginning, and what we hope it will look like in the future. That, for us, is only part of the story.

The other part, one that we would have perhaps missed had it not been for our interviews with our faculty, is the relationship of the literacy narrative to the larger activity system of our writing classrooms. Teaching the literacy narrative played an important role in creating meaningful learning situations for students. As one student told us, “I have come to realize while revising my literacy narrative that when I analyze topics that I have experienced and lived through, I am able to bring a whole new meaning to the table when expressing my thoughts and when scrutinizing details. . . . This insight allowed me to develop more on analysis instead of just telling my story.” In order to ensure the integrity of these situations, we learned that we must always critically examine the relationship of this important genre to the assignment sequences of our classrooms.

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Notes

1. We noted only one post that argued that the literacy narrative is unproductive.
2. When we talk about slowing down our basic writing course, we find it is difficult to separate the structural changes to the course (the 75 minute studio that increases face-to-face time with the instructor) from the revision of the curriculum (taking one assignment—the literacy narrative—and making it the focus of the entire course). The initial changes to the course involved adding the studio and beginning the course with a literacy narrative assignment, thus slowing down the pace and adding valuable time for drafting, revising, and discussing readings. But we are

also advocating for a slow down in the curriculum itself by focusing on the literacy narrative for the entire semester.

3. These writing samples were collected when the literacy narrative was only the first assignment in the sequence. The curriculum had not been revised to make the literacy narrative the whole curriculum. But the writing samples were powerful enough to compel us to consider keeping and expanding the literacy narrative in the basic writing curriculum.
4. We are using FYW (first-year writing) throughout this essay except for this one section where we use FYC (first-year composition) because Elizabeth Wardle uses FYC in her titles to both referenced articles here.
5. A version of this assignment sequence was recently piloted at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, where Christopher Minnix is Director of Freshman Composition. The focus of this sequence is on helping students link their literacy narratives to analytical genres by using the literacy narrative as a basis for critically questioning the way that reading and writing are taught. This sequence begins with the literacy narrative and moves to a rhetorical analysis of a published literacy narrative, as in the curriculum discussed here, then moves students to a comparative analysis of different perspectives on literacy, and an illustration essay that asks students to define their own perspective on how literacy should be fostered in the classroom. The sequence ends with a portfolio project that asks students to revisit their literacy narratives and speak to how their attitudes and ideas about their literacy are developing.

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