

Composition Forum 34, Summer 2016

Countering Institutional Success Stories: Outlaw Emotions in the Literacy Narrative



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Abstract: In the field of rhetoric and composition, literacy narratives are sometimes framed through the idea of “inventing the university”; this, unfortunately, creates a trope of literacy as success. I argue that the success trope limits student expression of “outlaw” emotions in literacy narratives—like loss, pain, and anxiety—and as a result, flattens conceptions of literacy and glosses over complex student life experiences and positionalities (race, class, gender, sexuality, etc.). This short pedagogical piece provides composition teachers with strategies that encourage students to identify a range of affective responses to the process of literacy acquisition.

Teaching the literacy narrative—as a form solely connected to the trope of literacy as success—is troubling.

I dream of student narrators telling the same, tired story about the kindly, influential teacher and the old-smelling school building and the ways they overcame the anxieties of too many years of institutional discipline and punish. These tropes haunt our discourses on literacy in rhetoric and composition, and they construct a version of the literacy narrative that doesn’t take into account the complex diversities of our students and their practices of everyday life that happened before, and continue to happen, inside and outside of our campus spaces and times.

The literacy narrative invites students to perform an act of “inventing the university” (Bartholomae), or to demonstrate how they gained access to the academy. Beth Daniell warns of this master narrative and challenges instructors to be leery of “feel good” success stories (401). Literacy as success lurks in our students’ imaginations: Kara Alexander reports that one third of the student literacy narratives she analyzes in her *CCC* article relied exclusively on this trope (623). Composition instructors should instead encourage “little narratives” that reveal students’ positionality (race, class, gender, sexuality) and complicate the ideology of literacy as something that can “oppress or resist or liberate”—sometimes all at once (Daniell 406). In other words, to counter these tired tropes that constrict student thinking about literacy, instructors should encourage students to write these “little narratives” that further allow for the expression of emotions beyond success.

As Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes discuss, pedagogies centered on narrative reflection often “prevent us from perceiving and analyzing critical differences” as student stories are normed through a process of finding commonality among the writers and audience members; they describe this erasure of difference as a “flattening effect” (431). We can further see how the success trope “flattens” the experiences of students and further conceals their emotional labor, especially basic writers, who may struggle in institutional settings and experience negative emotions—frustration, anxiety, pain—in relation to literate practices. I thus argue that we must re-imagine the genre of the literacy narrative to encourage student expressions of what Alison Jaggar calls “outlaw emotions,” or those feeling that are “[incompatible] with the dominant perceptions and values”—in this case, emotions outside the dominant narrative of literacy as success (166).

When I consider my own education, I may talk about my position and the ways I love my teaching and research, but I know all too well how formal gains in literacy are also met with losses. Often, academics are hesitant to discuss the emotional costs of education, of what it means to “invent the university” for those who come from working and lower-middle-class backgrounds. For some of our students, education creates distance from family and creates emotions of displacement, of loss.

It was the third summer of my PhD program, and I was home for break. My schooling took me across the country and

miles away from my Nonie—geographically, experientially. I remember watching her on the deck with her sister. Whispering confidences, she said, “I miss Rosanne when she goes.” Nonie was one of nine in an Italian-American family. She left school in the 8th grade, and she worked in garment factories sewing sleeves on shirts.

I missed Nonie when I was gone. I missed the trips she made every winter to the casino, the times she made her sauce, the 90th birthday celebration at the banquet hall, the rare moments when she would laugh—a soft cackle. When she was dying, I was delivering a paper at RSA.

If literacy is solely conceptualized as success, then there is no room in the composition of literacy narratives for the story I just shared, for other student stories that may contain “outlaw” emotions like loss and pain. Success tropes can’t be the only thing that rises to the surface in literacy narratives because complexity, difference, change, and diversity are boiled away. My brief literacy narrative discusses working-class, gender, and family issues in relation to the process of becoming an academic; it challenges the scripted narratives of success that academics often tell in our writing and in our talk with each other. We must recognize how success tropes force the subject to assume the identity of the ideal academic, a role that may be uncomfortable given someone’s life experiences and positionality. School is not safe for all students.

The field’s “inventing the university” ideology is the origin of our literacy-as-success nightmare. T. R. Johnson, in his article “School Sucks,” argues that we need a “renegade rhetoric,” one that enlivens and challenges a logos-driven, back-to-basics, painful sort of pedagogy. He asks, “Has the pressure to ‘invent the university’ . . . articulated itself as a certain refusal to empathize with students or to understand the worlds that created them?” (636). The complex nature of literate experience is sometimes shrunk in the teaching of the literacy narrative to one site: the classroom. Students are then tempted to produce success narratives about their schooling. Their lives outside the school setting, beyond the emotion of success, are sometimes not engaged. Are composition instructors creating a “flattening effect”—a concept forwarded by Alexander and Rhodes (431)—by glossing over difference in student literacy experiences in the name of institutional assimilation? I fear literacy narratives, as they are sometimes taught and written, aren’t renegade enough, aren’t queer enough, aren’t emotional enough.

As a means of challenging this problematic success trope, I suggest that we include some guiding questions for students during invention stages of the literacy narrative assignment (see [Appendix](#) for assignment):

- Have you ever judged someone for being too literate or not literate enough? Has anyone ever judged you? What emotions come along with those judgments?
- What have been your experiences with reading and writing education in school? Have they been largely positive? Negative?
- How do your life experiences and your positionality (race, class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, etc.) influence your understanding of literacy and language use? (Note: This question requires some scaffolding in terms of defining what “positionality” means and additionally having students reflect about how their multiple—and sometimes conflicting—identities influence how they perceive and move through the world. It is helpful to think about this question through the lens of the literacy narratives read in the class as models.)
- What are some of your family’s beliefs and values about literacy and formal education? How are these different from or similar to yours?
- Have you ever felt like an “outsider” to a group? Did you gain access to that group through learning the language? Alternatively, were you ever excluded from a group because of your inability to learn a language?

If, as Gee claims, literacy is our way of “being in the world,” then we must provide ways for students to view their literate practices as connected to their “values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities” (6-7), and, of course, emotions. If language is to be thought of as a way of creating ourselves and of understanding our identities—and differences—then writing instructors must insist on an expanded conception of the literacy narrative, for language is one of our only ways of “speak[ing] ourselves fully into existence and into relation with the other” or, I would add, against the other (Corder 482). My addition to Corder’s quotation here is significant, as I am trying to account for the idea that audiences of literacy narratives need not be approached in conciliatory ways; rather, it is sometimes our “incommensurability and unknowability to one another” that allows for critical emotional labor to take place (Alexander and Rhodes 432). We need to focus our curricula around the principle of rhetoric as identification and disidentification, and that involves teaching students how to communicate their narratives with emotional force to their addressed and invoked audiences.

In teaching such an expanded notion of literacy narratives, composition instructors may keep the following pedagogical goals in mind:

- Emphasize how literacy narratives are personal stories for public audiences. The public nature of these stories means that differences are often expressed, and thus conflict can occur. Students should recognize how their

- words have an impact, and they should be prepared for audience responses—affirmative or critical.
- Discuss how emotions are both individual and social phenomena. Discuss how pathos is the emotion invoked in the reader. Have students consider how they can convey their emotions through vivid language and imagery and how they can appeal to their reader's emotions.
 - Create class activities that emphasize the development of student voice. Speak about ethos as credibility and encourage students to construct their characters purposefully. Help students develop “reflective” voices that look back and comment critically on life experiences.
 - Choose model literacy narratives that represent the experiences of people from multiple backgrounds (race, class, gender, and sexuality). Authors like Sherman Alexie, Dorothy Alison, Gloria Anzaldúa, Jimmy Santiago Baca, Patricia Hampl, Eli Goldblatt, Mike Rose, Amy Tan, and Jay-Z may be good examples. Emphasize the “outlaw” emotions these professional writers express in class discussions.

Literacy narratives, through an investigation of identity, have the potential to show a range of emotions and communicate complex orientations toward schooling. Students should tell the stories that changed them, like the one I shared about my Nonie, instead of composing what they imagine to be the normative “script” of life in the academy. It is imperative to encourage students to think about literacy not only through a frame of success but to examine and describe other “outlaw” emotions that may be associated with schooling, such as loss, pain, and anxiety.

Appendix: Literacy Narratives{1}

This essay asks you to reflect on your writing, speaking, or reading life. We have spent the last couple weeks reading and discussing the genre of literacy narratives, and now you will apply this knowledge by looking at your own literacy “story,” your personal engagement with writing, reading, and language. Ideally, you will pick event(s) from your past, **either positive or negative**, dramatize it (them), and then explore it (them) with the purpose of coming to some kind of statement or insight about how language works in your life and our culture at large.

Remember literacy narratives have flashbacks as the author moves from describing a literacy event (**personal**) to reflection on how that event shaped their life (**also personal**) to an analysis of what that literacy experience says about culture (**public!**). So, literacy narratives are personal writing, but they make a **public statement** about writing and reading. In class, we discussed how literacy narratives have an “earth-shattering” moment that translates as a lesson for readers. Ask yourself, what is my purpose for sharing this literacy experience? What lesson(s) do I want my readers to walk away with after they finish reading my piece? What emotions do I want to elicit in my readers?

As we discussed in class, there is an often false correlation made when we think about literacy—the more literate you are, the better your quality of life. Basically, literacy leads to success. Many of us enter college because of this idea. Yet, this is a flattened idea of what literacy is and its affects. Gains in literacy may create feelings of pride and achievement in you and your family members, but these gains may also make you feel emotions like loss, pain, exclusion, anger, etc. What emotions do you associate with your literate experience? Are some of them positive? Negative? Both? How can you capture the complexity of your literate experience and emotions in your reflection?

You will use mainly descriptive detail (remember the lesson on figurative language?!), vivid scenes, and reflection to support some central issue or question related to literacy. Remember that your literacy narrative can analyze and comment on cultural aspects of language and literacy, or on the internal struggles language and literacy have posed in your life, or how educational institutions sometimes hinder our literacy development.

So, you want to **tell a good story**, with plenty of vivid, specific, concrete detail, about how language or writing has shaped you. But you also want to **hang the details on some larger idea** or point that emerges as you brainstorm, work through invention strategies, and draft the essay. It should eventually emerge as an exploratory claim, or speculation about the functions, purposes, or social importance of writing, language, and reading. And you want to make sure **you appeal to your reader's emotions** (pathos) through the creation of a **credible writing voice** (ethos).

This is your story, so it just needs to show some of your truth about writing, language, or literacy—remember, though, how Patricia Hampl commented that some memoir has fiction(s) in it! You are relying on memory, so it can't be 100% factual. It is supposed to depict some of your experience, **in your voice**.

You may start out from these several directions (or an idea of your own):

- You might look at an influential person or people (literacy sponsors!) who have helped your progress toward being a writer or using language. Conversely, you might want to engage with a person or people who may have hindered your development in literacy.

- You might look at some significant event(s) from your life.
- You might look at cultural attitudes toward literacy and writing. You can explore how you have navigated some of those for better or worse.
- You might look at the judgments you make about the literacy of others.
- You might talk about becoming literate (or a failure to become literate) in some subculture or group. You might talk about gaining membership (or not gaining membership) because you could (or couldn't) "speak" or "write" like the group.

We will workshop the essays for both effective "evidence" and "focus," or controlling idea. The main object, after all, is to share the experience with writing with your audience—the class—with as much detail and insight as possible.

Notes

1. This assignment is adapted from a memoir assignment written by my mentors at Eastern Connecticut State University, Dr. Stephen Ferruci and Dr. Susan DeRosa. For much of what I know about good teaching, I am forever indebted to them. I also would like to thank instructors at the University of Arizona who participated in the 101a (basic writing) collaborative in Fall 2013 and in 2014 for their advice and contributions to this assignment sheet. ([Return to text.](#))

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Return to [Composition Forum 34 table of contents](#).