

Expanding Definitions of Academic Writing: Family History Writing in the Basic Writing Classroom and Beyond

Sherry Rankins-Robertson, Lisa Cahill, Duane Roen,
and Gregory R. Glau

ABSTRACT: Narrow definitions of academic writing often do not serve students well because they ignore the rhetorically situated and social bases for writing and the potential role of writing to span the personal, professional, and civic areas of students' lives. Broadening school-sponsored writing to include writing about family can help students to see the relevance of writing to their lives outside of school. Further, writing about family can encourage students to reflect critically on their conceptions of family, often coming to see family as a more complex construct. Using the topic of family in writing courses provides opportunities for students to engage in non-threatening primary and secondary research and involves students in writing that is multimodal, cultural, academic, and public. This article describes some activities and assignments that help writers to explore the concept of family.

KEYWORDS: family writing; basic writing; community service; first-year composition; multimodal composition; academic writing

Regarding postsecondary writing expectations, we see an underlying problem of viewing academic discourse and academic literacies as transparent and generalizable. We propose a more rhetorical, contextualized view. Looking at conventional frameworks for academic writing paints a rich picture of assumptions about writing instruction. Joseph Petraglia identifies the result as general writing skills instruction (GWSI), with its “objective of teaching students ‘to write,’ to give them skills that transcend any particular

Sherry Rankins-Robertson teaches writing, including family writing, at Arizona State University, where she is currently a doctoral candidate in rhetoric and composition. **Lisa Cahill** is Assistant Director of the Student Success Center at Arizona State University's Downtown Phoenix and West campuses. **Duane Roen** is Professor of English at ASU, where he serves as Head of Interdisciplinary and Liberal Studies in the School of Letters and Sciences and as Coordinator of the Project for Writing and Recording Family History. He formerly served as Director of Composition, Head of Humanities and Arts, and Director of the Center for Learning and Teaching Excellence at ASU. **Greg Glau** is Director of the University Writing Program at Northern Arizona University. Previously, he was Director of Writing Programs at ASU.

content and context” (xii). In particular, GWSI characterizes the approach most commonly employed in first-year writing courses and consequently shapes, in part, how professors in other disciplines think writing can be taught and what skill sets their students should already bring with them. Petraglia explains that “at its core” GWSI has:

the idea that writing is a set of rhetorical skills that can be mastered through formal instruction. These skills include the general ability to develop and organize ideas, use techniques for inventing topics worthy of investigation, adapt one’s purpose to an audience, and anticipate reader response. (xi)

Petraglia argues that this approach to writing instruction does not take into account much of what writing theories explain about the act of writing as being complex, context-specific, rhetorically situated, and socially rooted. The GWSI approach contributes to producing a false set of expectations about the simplicity of learning to write. It also reduces the teaching and learning of writing to a finite number of courses (often a sequence of first-year writing courses) that, rather than continuing throughout a student’s undergraduate and graduate education, are contained in one year and taught without the involvement of that student’s major-specific professors.

David Russell further complicates the postsecondary approach to writing instruction when he argues that GWSI relies on a fictional discourse of academic writing, what he calls a universal educated discourse (UED). This discourse complicates the teaching and learning of writing because it constructs writing as a transparent, generalizable skill that students are supposed to learn once and for all. More so, students are often expected by their instructors to be able to broadly apply a set of general, a-rhetorical writing skills—the kind implied by GWSI—in their college course work despite the variety of rhetorical situations and audiences that they may encounter.

Viewing academic writing and literacies as transparent and generalizable can negatively influence the teaching and learning of writing because such a view has the potential to under-prepare students to meet the dynamics of changing rhetorical situations, diverse disciplinary conventions, and varied purposes for writing (Jones, Turner, and Street; Prior; Street [*Social*]). For example, the more variable the rhetorical situations of class assignments are, the less useful students may find their repertoire of learned generic writing skills. Further, such a view can result in unfairly labeling students’ writing skills as deficient in some way if their writing does not demonstrate

discursive practices expected by their professors (Berkenkotter and Huckin; Greene and Nowacek).

First-year composition classrooms, particularly basic writing classrooms, offer a starting place for helping students to develop a more robust understanding of academic discourse and academic literacies. When writing assignments are designed with this goal in mind, instructors have the opportunity to challenge and socialize students into academic ways of knowing that can transcend the classroom. In support of this framework is James Moffett who, in his influential, comprehensive theory of discursive practices, *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* (1968), argues that we, as writing instructors, need to change our thinking about writing assignments:

In many of our writing assignments, I see us feverishly searching for subjects for students to write about that are *appropriate for English* (emphasis in original); so we send them to the libraries to paraphrase encyclopedias, or they re-tell the plots of books, or then write canned themes on moral or literary topics for which no honest student has any motivation. Although asking students to write about real life as they know it is gaining ground, still many teachers feel such assignments are vaguely “permissive” and not as relevant as they ought to be. Once we acknowledge that “English” is not properly about itself, then a lot of phoney assignments and much of the teacher’s confusion can go out the window. (7-8)

“Asking students to write about real life” has gained even more popularity in the decades since Moffett drew attention to the ways in which writing instructors often feel conflicted when students craft writing that seems to transgress the “accepted” borders of academic discourse. Such writing assignments, perceived to transgress academic borders, are still at issue today, particularly in many basic writing and first-year composition classrooms because of pressure to have students demonstrate writing that can fit within traditional norms of academic discourse. Implicit in Moffett’s description is his encouragement for instructors to find other forms of writing that will not only help students to see academic writing in a larger context but will also engage them in writing about topics that are personally meaningful to them.

We propose family writing as a viable and effective option to engage basic writing students in “real life” topics while expanding the definition of academic discourse. Broadening school-sponsored writing to include writing about family can help students to see the relevance of writing to their lives outside of school. Further, writing about family can encourage students to

reflect critically on their conceptions of family, often coming to see family as a more complex construct. Using the topic of family in writing courses provides opportunities for students to engage in non-threatening primary and secondary research, involving students in writing that is multimodal, cultural, academic, and public.

Inventing the University to Include Family Writing

Students can benefit from an expanded definition of what counts as suitable writing in academic settings—definitions that “allow students to create a place for themselves and their own history in the curriculum” (Murie, Collins, and Detzner 74). As David Bartholomae suggests, making meaning via writing spans a wide spectrum of disciplines and pedagogies and provides students with a variety of challenges for which they need support. Bartholomae’s 1985 description of how students must constantly reinvent the university still has relevance today, specifically in his descriptions of the ways that students must constantly re-adjust their literate practices to fit the knowledge and conventions recognized and supported by the various disciplinary instructors for whom they are writing. Bartholomae’s metaphor of inventing the university through writing highlights the demands that university writing tasks place on students:

The student has to appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse, and he has to do this as though he were easily and comfortably one with his audience, as though he were a member of the academy or an historian or an anthropologist or an economist; he has to invent the university by assembling and mimicking its language while finding some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, on the one hand, and the requirements of convention, the history of a discipline, on the other hand. (135)

The problems cited in Bartholomae’s depiction are often sources of unstated assumptions or expectations. For example, students are expected to use the language of the academy, e.g., that of their professors or of the discipline of composition. Students are assumed to know how to balance the complexity of not only writing in a postsecondary environment but also for a particular discipline. Implicit in Bartholomae’s metaphor of students having to generate or invent an understanding of the university’s specific ways of communicating is that students are held accountable to a set of standards that may not have been explicitly imparted to them and that they may not

recognize. Students often need instruction about how to apply discursive standards to their writing and opportunities to contextualize the expectations that professors have of their writing, as with research and citation practices. They need help in negotiating their simultaneous and multiple positions of academic insider and outsider. Basic writing classrooms can address students' "disconnect" by providing writing assignments that enable students to simultaneously affirm what they already know (e.g., by allowing students to write about topics of personal, civic, professional, or academic importance to them); engage them with a real, rather than an artificial audience; and encourage them to learn new processes (e.g., rhetorical analysis or using primary versus secondary research), genres, and media.

Sherry Rankins-Robertson's recent experience in course development, along with graduate-level work in Writing Program Administration, have highlighted family writing as an exciting way to engage first-year students in meeting global outcomes, such as those outlined by the Council of Writing Program Administrators ("WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition"), while providing students with assignments in which they can become personally invested. The family writing program at Arizona State University was started in 2005 when Duane Roen, Rankins-Robertson, and several others designed the English degree in the School of Letters and Sciences to offer courses in several disciplines besides writing—communication, history, and digital technologies—with courses that included: Recording Oral Histories, Introduction to Writing Family History, Introduction to Researching Family History, Editing Family Writing for Public Audiences, Travel Writing, Writing a Personal History, Introduction to Digital Photography, Digital Publishing, and Immigration and Ethnicity in the United States. As this list of courses suggests, students are encouraged to develop interdisciplinary skills and experience to help them explore, research, and write about family from diverse perspectives. As the list further suggests, the degree is also designed to help students develop many 21st century literacies, from "reading online newspapers" to "participating in virtual classrooms" that, according to NCTE, are "multiple, dynamic, and malleable" ("The NCTE Definition").

Defining Family Writing: A Workspace for Growth

Rankins-Robertson and Roen have elsewhere identified family history, broadly defined, as an area of wide student appeal ("Investing Writers"). Before examining more closely what constitutes family writing, it is important to look at the concept of family, which can be difficult to define.

We can compare the notions of “family” to that of “technology”: Just as the term “technology” is used to define many objects for a variety of purposes (e.g., pencil, toaster oven, cellular telephone, automobile), “family” is used to define various roles and relationships in terms of emotional, physical, and other ties, toward common purposes. However, its categories are not stable ones; family is not a “concrete thing responding to a concrete need” (Cheal 12-13) and neither is family a fixed term; rather, the concept of “family” is often defined according to an individual’s perceptions of what that concept means or represents.

In purpose and concept, it is therefore necessary to resist the “meta-narrative” of family. In *Post-Modern Condition*, Jean-Francois Lyotard discusses the notion of a construct that has been centrally agreed upon (xxv). For example, family carries a meta-narrative of individuals linked together by legality or lineage. In “The Challenge of Family History,” Stephanie Coontz suggests that teachers also must be aware of how the concept of family has been “mythologized” in the sense that no family can live up to traditional, decontextualized images of the “typical” American 1950s “family.” Against the backdrop of such common cultural constructions of “family,” when writing instructors ask their students to discuss their families in class discussions or in writing, students might then feel awkward sharing details about their own familial oddities or perceived shortcomings. While Coontz’s students “treasure the role of family as a support and mutual aid,” they too often tend to “filter both their own complicated family histories and their personal aspirations through the lens of 1950s family and gender properties” (28). Classroom discussions of the myths surrounding “perfect” families often can alleviate student concerns, especially if such concerns are acknowledged in open forums that allow the meta-narrative of family to be shattered. To begin a discussion with students about family writing is to productively engage “who gets to be family” and “what constitutes family,” with students deciding the criteria and means toward locating an underlying definition.

Digging deeper into family history also contextualizes people’s life stories in specific places at particular times. Texts on family examine, define, and construct the nature of a family’s history often through stories and research. Such exploration focuses the events of a life within the context of a place and time while also discovering the social, cultural, and historical influences of the individual within a larger, connected unit. Many scholars agree that individuals are socially constructed beings with language that they have inherited (Gergen). For example, in *The Elements of Autobiography and Life Narratives*, Catherine Hobbs observes, “our identities emerge from

within a community . . . the language we use to speak and write is not at first our own. It comes from our cultures” (5). With this context in mind, family writing then presents reasons and contexts for basic writing students to explore the language, culture, and influences of the family unit and society. Students can explore the social construction of individuals, sometimes themselves, by looking at issues that influence the family within a historical and social paradigm. Like personal writing, which Rebecca Mlynarczyk notes as being a very complex and complicated construct (“Personal”), family writing serves the classroom community and the individual learner. However, family writing goes beyond the personal by offering students a lens through which to see social, cultural, and historical influences on individuals.

Transgressing the borders of academic and personal assignments, family writing affords basic writers the opportunity that Deborah Mutnick advocates for “students on the social margins,” which is “the opportunity to articulate a perspective in writing on their own life experiences” as a “bridge between their communities and the academy” (84). Donald McCrary has recently noted that students can enhance their literate practices and critical thinking if they are encouraged to bring their private discourses into academic spaces. McCrary’s case is aptly made by referencing students’ religious beliefs, often among the most private of all discourses. Likewise, family experience can be thought to fall into another highly private realm. This is the case even as students’ experience of family encompasses a range of modalities, both direct and indirect (e.g., written, oral, visual, and audio-visual), genres (e.g., personal letters, stories, obituaries, and tweets), and media (e.g., newspapers, Twitter, Facebook, Geni.com, podcasts, and video recordings). As personal writing assignments afford students the opportunity to bring their private discourses into the academic space, personal writing, according to Donald Murray, “makes it possible for us to explore the complexity of human experience, discover our response—intellectual and emotional—to that experience and share it with readers” (19). Murray argues that personal writing isn’t private, as it must be contextualized to have “significance beyond your life” (20).

The theories of personal experience and literacy, as they concern the writing classroom, intersect in the New Literacy Studies. In *Cross-Cultural Approaches to Literacy*, Brian Street argues for the association of the two, examining “the creative and original ways in which people transform literacy to their own cultural concerns and interests” (1). Such interests, Kate Pahl notes, can include family narratives and the identities of family members (“Ephemera,” “Habitus”). Similarly, Street argues that educators need to

recognize the difference between autonomous and ideological models of literacy. While the autonomous view holds that literacy itself will affect cognitive and social processes, the ideological view holds that literacy practices “are always rooted in a particular world-view and the desire for that view of literacy to dominate and to marginalize others” (“Autonomous” 2). For example, academic literacy practices that are too focused on discipline-specific knowledge have the potential of marginalizing students’ personal experiences; therefore, assignments that ask students to write on the family engage students by providing opportunities to integrate academic, cultural, multimodal, as well as public and private, connections. Stuart Greene and Rebecca Schoenike Nowacek emphasize the marginalization of students’ experience when expectations for academic writing dominate learning and instruction. They write:

As instructors we need to adjust our angle of vision in order to focus on our students. Students can write forcefully, even elegantly, especially when they have something to say. However, our students do not always know what our expectations are, despite our efforts to design seemingly clear and cogent assignments. Unfortunately, our expectations are often merely tacit, even when we think we have made them explicit. (341-42)

In making this point, their goal is to “complicate educators’ understanding of how students struggle to assume these [disciplinary] roles and how students negotiate a fundamental tension between adhering to the conventions of academic writing on the one hand and the conventions of academic inquiry on the other” (342). Thus, one way to address students’ struggles to assume the disciplinary and discursive roles expected of them is for instructors to analyze their own tacit understanding of academic literacy practices, including its purposes and practices.

A basic writing curriculum with structure and projects that include both specific goals and flexibility for students’ decisions will afford students with a workspace for growth. As Thomas Newkirk points out in *The Performance of Self in Student Writing*, composition should “serve students by providing a writing workspace where they could grow as writers and readers, and it would also serve the larger academic and public realms” (7). Similarly, other theorists (Spigelman; Bishop; Belenky, et al.) have also discussed the use of personal writing for public and academic discourse. The classroom, then, must be a space that supports multiple purposes—a space that allows for students’

individual and intellectual growth not only in terms of their academic selves but also for their personal, professional, and civic selves. Family writing allows students to derive their primary content from the self while also providing them with opportunities to learn about the influences of community, heritage, society, and history on family. Because family writing involves both self-writing and research, it is one way to answer Newkirk's call.

Variations on Family Writing

Family writing can serve as a chronicle—producing a list of events in chronological order—and can result in a manifesto—a public position paper on the author's stances. Memoirs—descriptions of events or people—can also result from family writing research. Travel writing—narration outwardly describing personal reflection on setting and culture—is also a possibility when students engage in writing about family. The author does not necessarily need to be connected to the experiences or to the family being examined because family writing can be crafted by an outsider who chooses one of the genres described above and who uses similar methods for research, invention, and production. While family writing offers students opportunities to engage with topics that they may already be comfortable with, it also accommodates research and argument, as students may explore the relevance of a political issue to their family or community, or social definitions of the family unit.

In “Remembering Great Ancestors: Story as Recovery, Story as Quest,” Stuart Ching tells of how he and his family “recover and construct our history” (44). Ching revisited the island of his family to trace their oral traditions. For Ching, recollection of family stories serves the purpose of translating “oral into literary discourses” to “comprehend his ancestors’ experiences, express gratitude for their dreams of a better life, and bear their struggle” (42). Members of cultures who have rich oral histories sometimes run the risk of losing the details of their histories or the stories that define and describe their customs; and telling stories preserves the memories and events for generations to come. For example, one student whose family had lived in the American Samoa islands has a culture predominately passed through oral history. For a class project, he developed a blog about his island, the community from which he comes, and outlined the positions of leadership as high chief that have been in his family over the past five hundred years. A portion of the project included interviews with his male relatives (father, uncles, and grandfather) to preserve his heritage. This writer was empowered

by being the collector of his family's and community's stories and wrote in his metacognitive reflection about the issues and family discussion surrounding his choice of making public and permanent the family's oral history. Six months after the student developed this course project, a tsunami devastated his community and many lives were lost. His collected stories of his people and land form a heritage that can now be passed on as lives are being rebuilt in his community. No one could have anticipated how monumental this class project would turn out to be for this particular student and his community. Family writing, within first-year composition and basic writing courses, offers recovery of "cultural and historical pasts" as support for "cultural identities in the present" (Ching 43). Exploring family stories not only allows for gathering and understanding the past, but it also gives family members an explanation of why and how their lives have come to this point.

Teachers can consider diverse assignments, modalities, and materials that can help basic writing students to become independent thinkers not only as a means of meeting the outcomes for composition but also as a way of engaging them in the technological world in which they live. Some resistance may come from teachers and administrators who have not considered other forms of composition beyond the traditional, text-based academic essay and who work within a more limited rhetorical pedagogy. In "The Challenge of the Multimedia Essay," Lester Faigley asks teachers to "think about rhetoric in much broader terms. We have no justification aside from disciplinary baggage to restrict our conception of rhetoric to words alone. More important, this expansion is necessary if we are to make good on our claims of preparing students to engage in public discourse" (187). Students often find that multimodal composition supports the genres and media of real-world audiences. These genres lend themselves to more public writing, beyond the scope of a classroom.

Multimodal student projects can include images, audio, and video, "exceed[ing] the alphabetic" so as to help students "think in increasingly broad ways about texts" (Takayoshi and Selfe 1-2). Many basic writing students have not experienced the possibilities that multimodal projects can present. These projects expand the range of what students can produce and learn. As Pamela Takayoshi and Cynthia Selfe recommend, students "need to be experienced and skilled not only in reading (consuming) texts employing multiple modalities, but also in composing in multiple modalities . . . because this type of instruction is refreshing, meaningful and relevant" (3-4). For example, if a student is producing a project on the element of home, the student may struggle in an essay to bring in the sensory details

of sounds; a soundscape, on the other hand, allows the student to capture the sounds of a busy home and to incorporate narration about the location. In another type of project, a student may be creating an informative piece on what American life was like for her Irish ancestors who immigrated to Boston. She can build a Web page that links to information on the potato famine, a common reason why many Irish settlers came to America, and also include information about American life in Boston during the late 1800s. An essay requires this student to include a summary of this historical material, while a Web page provides her with the flexibility to incorporate more layers including images, videos, and sounds of her ancestors' life in Boston.

Public literacy endeavors such as the National Writing Project (NWP) also support the goals and advantages of family writing, as they invite basic writers to explore their families and communities through exposition. The National Writing Project was founded in 1974 at the University of California-Berkeley as a movement of "teachers-teaching-teachers" ("History of NWP"). This project has spread to more than 200 sites in all fifty states. Founder James Gray states in his memoir of NWP, "Teachers at the Center," that his goal was to improve high school graduates' writing levels; the summer workshops of the NWP provide space where teachers of all levels can learn from the expertise of other teachers and work together as partners and colleagues. NWP supports a teacher-research approach where teachers of various disciplines and backgrounds come together to engage writers at any level. A common NWP assignment, "Mapping Your Neighborhood," asks writers to visually explore the space of a childhood home using drawing as an invention strategy. Writers then develop a list of memories within this space and freewrite on one of the memories.

Another NWP project that offers a community-based approach is "Viewfinders: Students Picturing Their Communities." In this project, students look at historical photos of their communities; they are then asked to depict the historical significance and community icon of the image (Hajduk 22). This encourages students to learn about the history of the space they have grown up in; this is important because the spaces are so familiar to them that they may have overlooked the significances of these spaces. For example, Sherry Rankins-Robertson grew up in Little Rock, Arkansas, just miles away from Central High School; the location was commonplace so it was not until much later that she explored the space as the site of the well-known desegregation battle in 1957. Family writing invites students to discover the historical significance of the communities in which they grew up and the influences of this history on the family unit.

National Public Radio offers public literacy projects that can also be included under the family writing umbrella. In *This I Believe*, writers develop a 500-word statement about the core values and beliefs that guide them through life (*This I Believe*), while *StoryCorps* is an interview project where a writer conducts primary research on a significant person in her life, family, or community (*StoryCorps*). Students in our Introduction to Family Writing course complete a biography that is based on the *StoryCorps* project that incorporates both primary and secondary research.¹ Some students include audio so that the voice of the interview subject is imbedded in the project; other students elect to use wikis or blogs as the format of an assignment so that family members can add their stories as well.

Most students find that family-centered course projects build bridges within their family as well as from the family to the community. For example, one student used YouTube as the mode for sharing the biography she developed on a family member who was a World War II veteran. To her surprise, one of the interviewee's comrades, who now lives in Germany, contacted her about the electronic interview. This project allowed the student to grasp a strong sense of audience-appropriate content and develop a purpose-driven product.

Family Writing and the Stretch Connection

Family writing assignments leave room for students to match their purpose for writing to the amount and type of research needed or specified by the assignment. In this sense, students can be challenged to expand their notions of research as more than consulting books and articles. For example, basic writing students can see the value of additional research practices: where interviewing a family member about family history is research; where calling a distant relative to ask a question about the grandparents' long-ago move from one state to another is research; where e-mailing an elderly aunt to query her about some family legend is research; and where drawing on one's own reflective journal is also research (Mlynarczyk, *Conversations*). What makes these projects even more exciting is that students begin with what they already know and can then move as far and as deep with their family research as an assignment warrants. In addition, family writing is often seen as work that can be continued over a long period of time. Of course, at some point any college writing assignment has to be turned in and graded. However, students will often continue to develop and expand on what they initially wrote for a college

class, and getting started with writing family history can lead to a lifetime pursuit.

As we examine the kinds of basic writing approaches currently operating in this country, it is easy to understand why family writing fits so well. We know from William Lalicker's 1999 survey of the structure of basic writing programs that most of the current models—prerequisite, stretch, studio, directed self-placement, and intensive—involve allowing students more time to develop as writers. Like many other colleges and universities, Arizona State University offers a “stretched out” version of first-year composition. In such stretch programs, students are seen as capable of doing college work; they use the same textbooks and do the same assignments as students in more traditional first-year composition classes. But they often spend two semesters with the same teacher and the same group of students as they work to fulfill their first-year composition requirement (Glau). Consider the extra writing and research that can be done on a family writing project over two semesters—the extra depth and breadth of the work students can do.

These “stretched out” programs can serve as ideal locations for family history projects, as students have more time to conduct research—especially extended interviews with family members—and gain more chances for peer review and revision. A stretched-out version of composition also provides students with more time to do visual research, looking for family photographs which can serve as wonderful resources for student writing, adding a richness and visual dimension to the texts they construct. The extra time also allows students to focus and follow up on those intriguing or unusual details they uncover when conducting family history research.

Greg Glau, for instance, learned that his paternal grandfather had difficulty gaining approval to receive Social Security payments when he had turned sixty-five. What happened was not atypical—a government mistake in the records—but further research found that the mistake *was* unusual: the government somehow thought that Grandpa was a female! More digging uncovered his birth certificate, which showed his name Joseph was listed as “Sophia.” And further exploration revealed that, because his great-grandparents were recent immigrants from Germany, their German accents must have sounded like “Sophia” when they were asked the name of the new baby, even though they were saying “Joseph.” Such extra research, often required when something unusual comes up in family history research, takes additional time, and the stretch model allows students to have more time for their research and writing.

Family Research: Where to Begin?

When teachers incorporate family writing into basic writing courses, students survey the family's history to determine what area and time they would like to study. To begin the exploration of a family's story, students can contact family members and examine family artifacts. Families have access to a variety of household items that have historical significance to the family, including letters, photographs, jewelry, dishes, or specialty artifacts like military service awards. Students can hold conversations with family members as a way to start collecting stories and can also rely on artifacts to bring additional details to life.

Family writing teaches students that locating and examining artifacts, or "tradition-bearing archives," can "open a family's connection with the cultures that define it" (Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater 363). While various types of writing can be encountered in a course employing family writing, students can be encouraged to think about why they may want to capture the stories. Family writing accommodates many starting-points: including, but not limited to, auto/biographical work on family members; researched materials that look at the family's lineage; location of immigration patterns and/or family records; collections of oral traditions and tales; analysis of journals/memoirs/diaries about and/or by family members; and visual family rhetoric, such as photographs, maps, and pedigree charts. One of our students used a combination of letters from her father to her mother during World War II and recorded interviews with her father to construct his biographical narrative. This project presented the opportunity for the student to assemble the love story of her parents through research and artifacts. Another student reconnected with her father after thirty years of absence from her life. The course projects provided a "reason" to interview him; she wrote about their first encounter:

I'm now 43 years old. That is a long span of time to have no contact with such an important relation. I had put away thoughts of him over the years. Having no idea where, or whether, he lived caused me too much sadness. He was dressed in a t-shirt and jeans made of a blue material unknown to me. The material was smoother than denim. He was about the same height as me. His skin is light like mine. He even has the same color and texture of hair, though his has more grey and there's a little less in the back. He walked up to me and smiled hesitantly. I decided that it was "all or nothing" and I hugged him. He hugged me back, and I was gratified.

These students were able to come to a better understanding of significant family events through the collection of the stories.

Family records located in libraries and online will be there long after the family members are gone and the artifacts have been sold off. Therefore, it is helpful to begin with what is most accessible—family members and artifacts in the family’s home, which might one day be lost. In family writing, students work to “persuade readers of the truth of a life, an experience or an insight” (Hobbs 18). Family stories reconstruct the past, so students can see what it was like for the family’s ancestors.

Through a combination of primary and secondary research, students can learn about the historical, social, and cultural lives of a family. Assigning family writing projects to students presents an opportunity to contextualize the need for effective research skills and to then easily introduce those skills to students by having them conduct family interviews or search newspapers in databases for articles on places or events that were of significance to a particular family. Teachers can help students use library sources with contexts that are interesting and meaningful to students. In this way, research may not seem as intimidating when students are searching for family records or talking to family members rather than searching for authoritative sources to support an arbitrarily assigned topic such as “why recycling is important.”

Moving Beyond the Classroom

Although the focus of most family history research and writing centers on individual students and their own family stories, the approach can also extend into the community. One way to encourage this is to ask students to interview, research, write about, and publish stories about anyone in the community. People in senior living homes are, of course, obvious possibilities for making such a connection, but it is also useful to ask students to consider researching and writing about people who were founders in the community or who, locally, were historically important; are current community leaders, especially those who do a good deal of social work for the community; or have a road, street, or building named after them. All of these kinds of writing help to establish links between a college or university course and the community, making connections that serve both students and the community. And when such texts are published (in print, on the Web, on CDs or DVDs), they add to the historical research that future generations will examine and consider—an important audience for our own students to think about as they write any family history.

In addition to involving students in family history writing and the aforementioned degree program, we also engage the general public in such writing via the Project for Writing and Recording Family History, supported by the School of Letters and Sciences at Arizona State University. The Project, which is consistent with the university's initiative called ASU in the Community (Jung), offers a variety of services for people who wish to write about their families. For example, Sherry Rankins-Robertson, Duane Roen, and other colleagues offer workshops throughout the metropolitan Phoenix area and in other parts of Arizona on topics such as the following: Writing about Family Members, Writing about Family Places, Writing about Family Events, Publishing Family Writing, Collecting Oral Histories, and Culturally Contextualizing Family Histories. These workshops not only benefit community members who learn how to write about family history, but also help to forge solid relationships between the university and the surrounding communities.

Although we schedule workshops that are advertised to the general public, we also receive invitations to conduct workshops for community groups (e.g., local family history societies) and retirement communities. These workshops provide us with opportunities to talk to the general public about our programs and about our university. Participants in these workshops have shown us their subsequent publications, including those that they have submitted to the National Gallery of Writing. The project leaders attempt to emulate some of the model community writing practices offered by the Salt Lake Community College Community Writing Center (Rousculp and Malouf). Such practices emphasize facilitating over teaching and coaching over tutoring. They also focus on a text's potential rather than on what might be lacking in a text. As evidence that community members feel that they benefit from these engagements with texts, we note that groups invite us back repeatedly. In one case, we were invited back nine times during a three-month period.

“Stories Worth Telling”

Students come to family writing with a common knowledge and language for thinking about family, in addition to personal experiences within familial structures. Students are interested in the topic of family because they are curious about their origins and would like to deepen their understanding of the family stories they have heard since childhood. If writing teachers and administrators can tap into these interests, we have an opportunity to com-

bat the problem of apathy that Michael Dubson describes: “A student writing a paper with minimal interest for ownership may experience the composition equivalent of an exam cram” (96). Drawing on students’ interests and personal knowledge can also move our classes toward more learner-centered spaces where learners’ interests and motivations are key.

When educators encourage students to write about topics rooted in family history and to draw on their home-based identities, schools can become more welcoming places that allow students to see the connection between who they are inside and outside the university setting. As illustrated by Shirley Brice Heath’s ethnographic study of students in Piedmont area communities during the 1970s, students sometimes experience a disjuncture between school and their homes: “unless the boundaries between classrooms and communities can be broken, and the flow of cultural patterns between them encouraged, the schools will continue to legitimate and reproduce communities of townspeople who control and limit the potential progress of other communities and who themselves remain untouched by other values and ways of life” (369). Thus, assignments that ask students to explore concepts of family can help students to stay engaged in schooling by providing them with opportunities to learn more about who they are and how culture, history, and society affect their particular family or families in general.

Providing an opportunity for students not only to complete assignments in various classes but also to take courses in family history can make a significant difference in their lives and voices as writers. One student reflected on his particular oral history project by saying, “A project like this makes you realize that we don’t know as much as we think we know about people even when they are our family.” Another student, after returning home from class one night, commented on the importance of collecting family stories:

I realized that every person in this world has a story. Everyone has a story worth telling, no matter how much or how little you have gone through, or how long you have lived. We all have something to share and something to learn from one another. It made me sad and happy all at once to come to this realization. I was sad because I realized that some of us will never have our stories heard, and some of us are unwilling to listen to the stories being told around us. I was glad though that I realized the power in listening, the comfort of hearing another’s struggles, someone else’s happiness.

Students respond positively when they are challenged to not only research and construct a family's history but also to use a variety of media and genres throughout the course. One student said in her portfolio reflection, "In summary, I want to say that of all my classes, I have learned the most—both technologically and in writing skills—in this class." She also said that, even though she was excited about each assignment, she still "approached [those assignments] with a certain amount of trepidation as it was something new to do or learn."

Family writing projects can present students with ways to use their critical thinking skills by asking them to determine how best to respond to the rhetorical situation in which they are composing. We know that "[t]eachers who compose the most effective assignments, then, don't outline a step-by-step procedure for students to follow; instead they craft assignments that prompt writers to think in new ways" (Hess 29). Therefore, it is most powerful when students make decisions about the types of document they want to produce based on their conceptions of a particular purpose and audience. Teachers must be aware of (and open to) all available modes of representation and have resources ready to aid students in not only essay writing, but also other forms of composition that incorporate multiple genres, media, and modes. Family writing provides such opportunities.

For most college students, the academic arena of life spans the years from about age five to about age twenty-two, with some students taking more time, including those who enroll in graduate programs. Further, some students enroll in life-long learning courses offered by colleges, libraries, or community centers. However, for most students the other arenas of life have a much longer span. That is, a person's professional life typically spans from age twenty-two to age sixty-five. The civic arena can begin in childhood and continue until the end of life. Given these spans, we think that writing in college needs to equip students with skills and knowledge to mine writing's potential throughout life. Whether basic writing teachers are working with community members or students (who also are community members), asking individuals to write about family and family history can spark a lifelong interest in writing. Such writing, as Murie, Collins, and Detzner note, is writing for "real purposes" (71).

Our experience with writers is that once they begin writing about families, they are often committed to crafting and sharing projects that fulfill their needs to maintain connections with other people. Writing about family in academic spaces provides writers with the research and rhetorical

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skills to collect stories of family and community that otherwise might be lost. It also empowers writers to make a difference beyond the walls of the classroom.

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Note

1. Further information on the projects described in this article may be obtained by contacting Sherry Rankins-Robertson at Sherry.Robertson@asu.edu.

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