

Reflections on Learning: A Composition Curriculum to Meet the Needs of At-Risk Writers

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One challenge faced by many writing teachers is meeting the needs of students with varying skill and confidence levels. This article describes strategies used in a Composition and Rhetoric I course to meet the needs of basic and college-level writers. Sample assignments focusing on the theme of literacy and learning are provided, including an effective pre-writing strategy called the Literacy Lifeline. The practices described are supported by Bartholomae and Petrosky's course framework in Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts (1986) in addition to other sources.

Sometimes it is not until we reflect on a past experience that we realize all that has been gained from that situation. – Composition Student

One of the joys of teaching first-year composition is also one of its greatest challenges: the diversity of backgrounds, attitudes, and skills students bring to the class. At my institution, like most, our students have varied backgrounds – some first-generation college students, some from urban areas while others are from rural areas, some upper or middle class while others come from working class families. These students also come to our institution with diverse attitudes toward course content – some who love writing and reading, and others who hate it.

In our first-year composition courses, students have varying writing skill levels. In this situation, teaching writing is much like driving: one has to steer, accelerate, watch oncoming vehicles, be aware of pedestrians, and make quick decisions all at once. Likewise, a composition teacher has to work simultaneously with basic writers, competent writers, and excellent writers, trying to challenge each level without leaving anyone behind. Because of these challenges, this article focuses on a curriculum

developed to address the range of abilities in a first-semester composition course.

Since the university offers only one level of first-year composition, I need a variety of strategies to meet the needs of underprepared students without alienating students with the prerequisite skills for college-level writing. To begin, I revisited Bartholomae and Petrosky's (1986) description of their six-credit Basic Reading and Writing (BRW) course in their seminal text, *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts*. According to their syllabus, BRW "is a course for beginning college students that is modeled after a course for advanced graduate students. That is, it is a course where students are expected to develop their own ideas on a subject... and to report what they learned to others" (p. 47).

Depending on class demographics, Bartholomae and Petrosky use topics such as adolescence (for classes of traditionally aged students) and work (for classes of mostly non-traditional students). The course sequence is divided into three sections:

1. Students discuss their experiences (based in part on their reading about adolescence or work).
2. Students read a set of case studies and make observations and generalizations.
3. Students synthesize the above and conduct research with traditional secondary sources (Bartholomae & Petrosky, 1986).

I selected literacy as our topic because of its universal appeal and the belief it would help students develop confidence as writers and learners. Belasco (2001) defines this term intentionally in the plural form, literacies: "the many different sets of reading, writing, thinking, listening, and behavioral skills that make up the numerous communities of the academic world and beyond" (p. 2). Many students, in their first semester of college, think of literacy as the act of decoding and encoding written language. By assigning readings that support Belasco's definition, students can begin to understand literacy as a much broader concept. In selecting this theme and the readings, I hoped that students would identify themselves, regardless of their perceived skill levels, as lifelong learners and as participants in the academic world they were just beginning to navigate.

In developing the sequence of writing assignments, I tried to attend to the needs of basic writers enrolled in the course. According to Wall (1986), "What is 'basic' about basic writers and readers is not simply

their lack of control over the conventional rules of written discourse; it is a kind of naiveté born of their inexperience with what it means to try to sound educated” (p. 105). What better place than English composition, regardless of students’ ability, to address the skills and conventions needed to succeed in academia? And what better way to begin than by positing that the students are already experienced learners?

Salvatori (1986) explains that “as long as [students] think about themselves in these terms [of skill deficiency], they will continue to act as if they were incapable of learning to read, to write, and to think, our first pedagogical move is to demonstrate that they know more than they think they know” (p. 138). To facilitate students’ recognition of their own knowledge base, I begin by adopting the tenets of narrative therapy and asking them to discuss personal learning experiences.

According to Deming (2001), “People understand their lives in terms of stories, or narratives. Narrative therapy helps clients to replace problem-based stories (dominant stories) with ‘preferred stories’ that focus on the person being in control of or overcoming the problem” (p. 32).

The use of the term “narrative therapy” might make more than one composition teacher hesitate to embrace this pedagogy – after all, we are not therapists. However, we do help students to bring order and clarity to the experiences they render in writing. Others in our field might argue that “personal” writing does not help students develop the expository writing skills they will need in future courses. With this model, though, the personal essays students write and revise form the basis for later assignments that require more intentional critique, analysis, and synthesis. What follows is the sequence of assignments I use, beginning with a prewriting activity that provides the foundation for the first two assignments.

I begin the personal narrative assignments by asking students to map significant events in their education. I refer to this prewriting activity as a *Literacy Lifeline*. I caution students that this information will be shared with me and with peers and give them permission to share as much or as little as they like. As a team building activity, each person in the group maps out significant life events—limited to the theme of learning—on a line, sharing as much or as little as preferred. In the group, the goal is for the team members to get to know each other. My goal is a bit different. The assignment is:

Literacy Lifeline

Chart the significant events of your education on a lifeline. Education here is defined to include experiences in traditional classrooms (learning to write in kindergarten) as well as experiences outside of school (learning to skydive). Experiences may be good (the book that changed your life) or not so good (the mean teacher in second grade). Start with your birth and end with the present time. You can share as much or as little as you like. Remember, much of what you write will be shared with others in the class as well as with me.

This activity is challenging for students who have been told repeatedly to avoid first-person writing. To lessen resistance, I participate in this activity with my students, by putting my lifeline on the board as an example. This simple act has a number of benefits: it humanizes me to the students, provides examples for students who get “stuck” trying to think of or remember events, and shows it is OK to express negative thoughts as long as they are honest. Sometimes, I will provide newsprint and markers for students, many of whom enjoy color-coding for different types of events or drawing pictures in addition to using words. This activity gives students a visual image of their learning and literacy accomplishments, one that forms the basis of the first two assignments:

Essay Assignment 1:

Identify a positive moment in your life as a learner. It could be something that happened in school (a favorite subject, significant class, a teacher, a book) or something you learned outside of the classroom (how to play guitar). Develop an essay about your experience, demonstrating an appropriate focus and thesis statement.

Essay Assignment 2:

Return to your lifeline. This time, identify a learning experience in which you had to overcome a challenge or obstacle. Develop an essay in which you discuss how you overcame that obstacle. Refer to the feedback you received from me and from your peers on the first essay in order to improve your writing on this assignment.

Once students complete the first two essay assignments, we discuss revision strategies. As we know, it is challenging to help students see revision as more than simply editing. To overcome this challenge, I require students to frame the third assignment, a revision of one of the earlier essays, with a prospectus outlining their plans for a revision and an abstract summarizing and assessing their changes. Both parts of the

assignments require at least some degree of reflection and planning, as shown in the following assignment:

Essay Assignment 3:

Select one of the first two essays to revise. In class, we will discuss and practice the improved use of description, figurative language, introductions, and conclusions in addition to our usual weekly discussion of grammar and punctuation points.

There are three parts to this assignment, all of which you must complete for full credit:

1. Prospectus: Each of you will write a prospectus before submitting a new essay. You will explain which essay you chose to revise, why you chose to revise that particular assignment, and how you will improve upon the original.
2. Revised essay.
3. Abstract: After completing your revision, you will write a reflective summary about the process, explaining not only the content of the essay but what worked well and what was challenging about the revision.

Please keep in mind that your revised essays will be read by the entire class as part of our next assignment. Again, share personal information accordingly.

Given the last sentence of the third assignment, students expect that they will have to share papers in groups or that I will distribute copies. The latter is true, but I use Bartholomae and Petrosky's method of distributing the essay in book form. I simply compile the essays in an effective order (generally making sure two essays on a similar topic, such as learning to play soccer, are not side-by-side), print a cover, write a table of contents, and take the students' work to our university print shop.

The design of the book is no small detail. When I first used this strategy, I just asked the print shop to put the essays together in any order and put a cardstock cover on it, with no images, no title, and no table of contents. Later, I became more creative with the design and developed a title for the collection such as *Reflections on Learning*. Student response to this technique has been positive. The last time I taught this course, students received the book right before Thanksgiving break and expressed eagerness to take it home to show it to their parents. One student, after the semester was nearly over, and he did not technically "need" the book anymore, asked if I could provide an extra copy because he misplaced his

own. It meant a great deal to the students to see themselves in print, as a legitimate community of writers. The more attractively bound the essay collection was, the more it legitimized their sense of accomplishment.

This collection serves as the beginning of the next assignment, the goals of which are to help with synthesis strategies and transition from narrative to expository writing, the second stage of Bartholomae and Petrosky's structure. The fourth assignment is:

Essay Assignment 4:

Read *Reflections on Learning*, written by you and your classmates. What common patterns and experiences do you observe in the essays? Take your observations and develop a theory about factors that contribute to a positive learning experience.

This assignment requires students to generalize from their classmates' experiences as well as their own, and to provide support for their own theories. In reading assignments to this point, students have read and compared literacy narratives (or at least excerpts of them) from authors such as Frederick Douglass, Helen Keller, Richard Rodriguez, and Margaret Mead. They have had experience in contrasting how different writers experienced language learning and they have analyzed the strategies these and other writers used to render their experiences for a reading audience. This background, however brief, provides students with a context for developing working theories about learning and with experience in analyzing and synthesizing their reading—the difference is that the authors under consideration are peer writers rather than traditionally anthologized literary figures.

Since my institution does not require library research until the second semester, this next library research assignment is an option I use if there is time remaining in the semester. Given that we are working with the theme of literacy, it is important that students begin or continue their development in library research, including related issues of academic integrity (such as citing sources, avoiding plagiarism, and the consequences of academic dishonesty). The following is an example of a library research assignment to help students develop information literacy skills:

Essay Assignment 5:

Use library sources to support your theory about learning experiences, described in Essay 4. First, write an annotated bibliography (to

be defined and discussed in class, with examples) of seven to ten sources. Then, write a persuasive essay using the course artifacts, personal experience, and traditional secondary sources.

The benefits of this course, based on Bartholomae and Petrosky's (1986) framework for a basic reading and writing course, are many. Student-centered content and validation of student experience improves student confidence and challenges basic and advanced writers alike. The course integrates critical reading and writing skills, still allowing plenty of time for sentence-level grammar, punctuation, and style instruction. Student comments from one section speak to their reaction to assignments and to past learning experiences:

"I really liked this assignment as a whole because it was my personal experience."

"As I was writing and reliving this experience, I had a chance to not only better my paper but take time to reminisce [sic] on my life. This was a good outcome to the process."

"I have never had a positive learning experience in school, but I have learned a great deal from life experience.... So far this class has shown me that writing can be fun, not always torture."

The student comments reflect the benefits of this curriculum. As one student improves her paper and reminisces on her life, she implies a willingness to see academic and personal improvement as other than dichotomous. Validation of out-of-classroom learning is significant, as we see in the student who realizes that writing no longer has to be "torture." One of my hopes is that students' reflections will continue beyond our fifteen weeks together—but if it doesn't, those fifteen weeks provide students with opportunities to see connections among their learning successes and the benefits of the challenges they have faced.

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