

# Literacy Narratives and Confidence Building in the Writing Classroom

Caleb Corkery

*ABSTRACT: The literacy narrative can make a unique contribution to composition studies, illustrating both how our culture inhibits literacy and how people overcome difficult obstacles in learning to read and write. Literacy narratives highlight for writing teachers the life lessons that have advanced people toward their literacy goals. These stories are often about the struggle for and triumph of confidence. Correspondingly, as a pedagogical tool, reading and writing literacy narratives may serve to build confidence in some of our least comfortable students. However, literacy narratives can present obstacles to school literacy as well. Some students are likely to have difficulty identifying with the narrators. Furthermore, when its characteristic values and conventions conflict with a student's cultural orality, the genre can have an alienating effect. This article discusses the advantages and disadvantages of using literacy narratives in the writing classroom. My intention is to provide an overview of how well literacy narratives can help students overcome cultural obstacles to writing in college.*

Scholars devoted to multicultural education have made it their project to promote pedagogies that account for and appreciate the differences among those in the classroom. Students arrive on campus with many perceptions of how they differ from the school community. In particular, students may feel that their familiar use of language will not be valued by college professors. Pedagogies influenced by multicultural studies would ideally relieve this alienation by making students see how their differences fit into the course work. This attention to the student's perceived position in relation to the academic realm suggests that the beginning point for teaching is next to the student. Bonnie Lisle and Sandra Mano, in their vision of a multicultural rhetoric, argue that students should be given opportunities to write about their cultural heritages and identities to make them feel more comfortable writing in a college setting (21). Unavoidably, students must develop their "academic voices" out of the identities they bring with them to college; teachers who focus on the contexts that produce the students' voices gesture invitingly for them to find their place in classroom discourses. Denise Troutman finds much support among composition theorists for "encouraging

---

**Caleb Corkery** is Assistant Professor of English at Millersville University of Pennsylvania. His research interests are in multicultural issues surrounding literacy and in African American rhetorical traditions.

© Journal of Basic Writing, Vol. 24, No. 1, 2005

### Literacy Narratives and Confidence Building

students to discover, explore, and develop their authentic voices, because of the confidence and strength that result" (37).<sup>1</sup>

One of the most appealing features of the use of literacy narratives in a writing classroom is its witness to the process of making the transition into a new, more empowering linguistic community. These stories present the students with proof that the struggle to attain a desired but foreign form of literacy is manageable. The personal life overcomes the anonymous institution. The personal voice breaks through and makes a claim. Such authors can pull students magnetically with their hard-knocks credibility and educated polish. This ethos can be especially effective for students who are inexperienced and lack confidence entering into an academic writing setting.

For some students, literacy narratives provide examples not only of characters to model but also of techniques to emulate. If students are able to identify with the drama facing a character's move from one linguistic community into a more powerful one, understanding and practicing the author's methods may seem achievable. These stories confer upon students the importance and relevance of personal experience. They demonstrate how the individual voice can prevail over institutionally imposed forms of literacy. But certainly not all students will respond comfortably. The students perhaps least likely to identify with such stories are students who have the most trouble imagining themselves participating in schooled literacy, perhaps because of the influence of oral tradition in their backgrounds. Students who already feel "outside" of that new literacy are more likely to see the successful narrators as foreign, given the "inside" position from which the authors write.

In this article I will discuss both advantages and disadvantages of using literacy narratives in the writing classroom. Current work in composition studies supports the value of developing community and personal literacies as a way to bring students into academic writing (see Bishop "A Rhetoric"; Couture; and Mutnick). And literacy narratives are recognized for their ability to help students build on the communicative approaches they already possess.<sup>2</sup> I begin by examining this genre for the opportunities it presents for student writers; however, I also critique its effectiveness as a pedagogical tool. I am particularly concerned about the difficulty students are likely to have identifying with the narrators. An additional concern I discuss is the alienating effect this genre may have when students feel that its values and conventions challenge their own cultural orality. My intention here is to provide an overview of how well literacy narratives can help students overcome cultural obstacles to writing in college.

## LITERACY NARRATIVES AND CONFIDENCE BUILDING

Asking inexperienced writers to read and write literacy narratives offers several possible benefits. Published literacy narratives provide examples of how one can move into a new language world. Through this movement, the narrator, rather than falling into stereotypical roles, demonstrates empowering ways to define oneself, paths students can use when drafting their own literacy story. The exemplary narratives model ways that one's personal use of language can make its way into the formal literacy of a published book. Also, literacy narratives bring into the readers' consciousness unexamined assumptions about their own use of language. Awareness of the choices one has made as a communicator in the past can help a student see the potential advantage in making other choices and still call them one's own.

Narrative genres in general offer students channels by which to import the meanings of their home cultures into the classroom. However, just as literacy narratives do not take for granted that assimilation into the academic culture is easy or without cost, neither should classroom teachers. Since teachers must respect their students' rights to privacy and their vulnerable positions as uninitiated academics, assigning literacy narratives requires revealing only those aspects of their students' lives that are relevant to the course. And by the time anyone has graduated from high school there are surely literacy experiences that would range from the classroom to the street. Assigning students to examine the ways in which their pasts have influenced the communicators they have become uncovers and points up the complex issues that accompany their move into higher education. But the portrait is, of course, in their hands. How they position themselves in relation to the literacies taught in school is up to them.

Mary Soliday has been a strong champion of literacy narratives, especially in regard to their ability to bridge student and school worlds. In *Writing in Multicultural Settings*, Soliday suggests the use of literacy narratives to "initiate" students into academic discourse (272). Soliday finds that reading and writing literacy narratives help students reveal how feeling different or feeling pressure to assimilate has influenced their learning experiences (261). Exposure to these stories, Soliday believes, will benefit both student and teacher by helping them to discover "generative points of contact between the life and language of school and that of work, family, church, and so forth" (270). Elsewhere, Soliday suggests the value of literacy narratives as examples of transition between language worlds: "Literacy stories can give writers from diverse cultures a way to view their experience with language as

### Literacy Narratives and Confidence Building

unusual or strange. By foregrounding their acquisition and use of language as a strange and not a natural process, authors of literacy narratives have the opportunity to explore the profound cultural force language exerts in their everyday lives" (511). Through writing in this genre, students can interpret or translate their experience to suit their position as a student.

Soliday points out another important advantage to this genre, the opportunity it presents for revising and strengthening one's student identity. Observing how others use narratives to reshape their identities may also suggest ways to redefine oneself desirably. In a study of high school students who left and returned to school, Betsy Rymes found that the students reshaped their identities in narrating their "dropping out" and "dropping in" stories. The students' role in the story can be altered for their own benefit. They are "not immutable themes that necessarily or interminably dominate the lives of these young men and women. Rather, these themes, by virtue of the context of their telling, were essential to *these* stories, and the students' self-portrayals in these meetings. These portrayals, these lives, are always subject to change" (39). Storytelling provides a turning point in the students' identities. Rymes claims that former high school dropouts can re-script themselves through narratives that eliminate their past identities (91). Likewise, literacy narratives can offer students a chance to adjust their self-images to place themselves comfortably within their new academic community.

Since there are numerous types of literacies and countless events that relate to developing literacy, students should discover different possibilities in their portrayals. And given the opportunity to redefine oneself through narrative, the writer's depiction might gravitate toward identification with the academic audience she is trying to become part of. All students are likely to find comfort in presenting a portrait of themselves as communicators rendered from their vision of the world. But students from communities that traditionally have not had access to higher education are liable to benefit the most from a genre that presents non-traditional paths to schooled literacy. As Deborah Mutnick points out, such pedagogies can help students who might feel alienated in a school environment: "For students on the social margins, the opportunity to articulate a perspective in writing on their own life experiences can be a bridge between their communities and the academy" (84).

Though literacy narratives typically depict the connection between marginalized communities and mainstream literacies, they are not beneficial only to students who feel alienated in school, nor should they be conceived

Caleb Corkery

of as assignments suited only for “at-risk” students. The concerns they address for how one “fits in” are appropriate for any collegiate newcomer. Some may just need more assurance than others. But there is benefit for all students in observing these differences. According to Mutnick, “Such student writing is . . . a potential source of knowledge about realities that are frequently misrepresented, diluted or altogether absent in mainstream depictions” (84). All students, regardless of background, can benefit from the cultural repository made available through such writings (85).

Viewed as moments of cultural expression, literacy narratives take on points of view in a dialogue, which can be empowering for students, as I pointed out earlier. Wendy Hesford also suggests that a dialogic approach to autobiographical writing can assist the student to “recognize [his or her] complex identity negotiations and discursive positions” (149). Hesford points out that since there is no true, essential self the student can reveal, the students’ perceived “real” voices emerge out of the discourse communities they are most comfortable in (134). Hesford recommends that we “learn to focus on the discourses of our students” (135) by giving them opportunities to “negotiate their identities discursively” (135). As writers of literacy narratives, students need to negotiate the different life forces that shape their identities as communicators. Reading literacy narratives assists this dialogue by illustrating its universality. According to Caroline Clark and Carmen Medina, “Reading a text as a literacy narrative, the reader engages in the character’s process of developing an identity and becoming literate. Narratives by women and people of color enable readers to understand their struggle; they are a means to negotiate the process of literacy and development of identity” (65).

Understanding how one is culturally scripted not only affirms one’s identity but also critiques its limitations (65). Literacy narratives introduce in a concrete, familiar form many complex issues concerning the social construction of meaning. By putting the subject matter in the students’ domains, this genre forces students into “understand[ing] their own histories and cultural practices within communities” as Michelle Kelly points out in her study of literacy practices among African American youth (246). This self-analysis can challenge students to see themselves and the people they have learned from in wider arenas of discourse. Such awareness can enable an individual to use this autobiographical form to shape new social spaces for the people he or she identifies with (Mutnick 82).

## **Imitation**

As I have explained, literacy narratives play an important role pedagogically through the connections they offer to students' lives. The issues surrounding schooled literacy might be quite relevant for initiating identification with the narrator as well as pointing out the role of literacy in one's life. Either way, the lesson is personal. The text is seen within the context of the students' lives. Emulation naturally follows from close associations between reader and narrator. Developing college writers are likely to benefit by following the examples of literacy narratives.

Getting teachers to accept imitative practices in the classroom is not easy, though. Compositionists today are reluctant to use imitation. In 1980, Paul Eschholz's contribution to the widely distributed *Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition* states that "Writers can best learn from what other writers have done when they find themselves in similar situations. Teachers (as well as students) need to read with a writer's eye and to develop a file of models that can be used in their own writing as well as in their teaching" (36). But no echo of this advice sounds in the 2001 overview of approaches to composition, *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies* (Tate et al.), which devotes no space to prose models or imitation. Frank Farmer points out in his latest book that imitation has long been discredited by composition teachers ever since "our wholesale rejection of formalism, behaviorism, and empiricism" (73). But he also notes that, ironically, many rhetoric and composition scholars champion the usefulness of imitation in the teaching of writing (73). For instance, contemporary proponents of imitation such as Charles Schuster claim that studying the choices of other writers can teach one more sophisticated uses of language: "style develops through the imitation of—and association with—other styles" (598). And as Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee point out in their textbook *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*, "imitators may borrow the structures used in the imitated sentence, supplying their own material, or they may try to render the gist of the original passage in other words" (295). Bringing imitation down from the theoretical realm and into our classroom practices can assist students in numerous ways.

Much of the trust put into pedagogies that use imitation is indebted to the work of Quintilian, the important classical educator. In four volumes, Quintilian lays out detailed instruction on how to raise the perfect citizen-orator. His approach relies on the power of imitation. Because we learn how

to speak by modeling those around us, Quintilian gives careful attention to one's influences. Much of his curriculum focuses on deliberate imitation of great speakers.

Quintilian tells us that parents and teachers must be vigilant in exposing children only to the highest quality of language. His premise is that language skills are learned consciously and unconsciously from all contacts with language beginning at birth. These exposures beget habits, and from "such practices springs . . . nature" (20). For this reason, good speech must be cultivated because it can be so easily corrupted. Since "good [habits] are easily changed for the worse," he says that correct speech is of a higher quality and more difficult to learn (20). But following examples of the correct and beautiful creates its own excellence, he argues.

Teachers throughout the ages have been influenced by Quintilian's attitude toward students' skills and have used imitation as a standard part of instruction.<sup>3</sup> For centuries, teachers believed, like Quintilian, that to become an effective speaker one must imitate the greatest orators. This approach for training speakers transferred easily to writing instruction. Today, writing students are trained by the canonical works of such writers as George Orwell, Wayne Booth, and Maxine Hong Kingston found in many composition readers. However, these prose models are offered as correct examples to follow and as invention tools for engaging with issues. Quintilian's emphasis on infusing the student's language with the choices available through various models has been supplanted by a focus on the style and conventions appropriate in academic writing. Such views can be traced back to the formalist thinking Martin Nystrand, Stuart Greene, and Jeffrey Wiemelt describe in their account of the history of composition studies when "writing instruction focused on features of good ('model') texts, and much time was spent teaching students to avoid common, egregious text errors" (175). Today, countless composition readers present example texts to illustrate each chapter's rhetorical lesson. The model essays are rarely offered as exercises for practicing the author's style and technique.

Following prose models in a composition reader, however, is different from what many scholars see as the potential in imitation pedagogies. In addition to helping students understand and employ an accepted pattern, imitation can play a role in the way we develop our voices since the interactive nature of language makes imitation unavoidable. The influence of Mikhail Bakhtin upon composition theorists has helped deepen our understanding of the process by which we use the language of others to develop our own. As Charles Schuster explains Bakhtin, "Words come to us from

other speakers; our job is to lay claim to this verbal property” (596). We depend upon imitation not only in the sense that we learn from examples in context; we automatically use the language of those we engage with in order to communicate at any moment. Farmer explains that “the unconscious imitation of another’s words is crucial to the continuance of any dialogue with those words. To maintain and to further dialogue, therefore, we must first know how to speak the words of another as a requisite for dialogue with the other” (76). There is always a simultaneous back and forth between the position one assumes and the way one’s audience speaks: “The writer continually audits and pushes against a language that would render him ‘like everyone else’ and mimics the language and interpretive system of the privileged community” (Bartholomae 143). In establishing one’s position within the discourse community, one “must come to know that word, as it were, from the inside out” (Farmer 91).

Though the dialogic nature of language causes us to borrow from others unconsciously, there are times when the difference between the speaker’s language and the audience’s is very apparent. This dissonance could make the speaker uncomfortable and unable to achieve the seamless integration of the other’s language described by Bakhtin. Rebecca Moore Howard recommends overcoming the difficulty of entering unfamiliar discourses by appropriating new usages. Pointing out that “a writer’s text *always already* functions as a repetition of its sources” (56-57), Howard suggests that teachers encourage their students to use blocks of other writers’ words as a stage for developing their own use of the same language. Quoting from Mary Minock’s work, Howard claims that students’ imitation “is always creative, if for no other reason than that it places the passage of text into a new context. ‘Repetition presumes alterity; the more a text is repeated and altered, the more it is committed to unconscious memory, and the more the power of its words and syntax is there to be imitated’” (56).

### **Imitation and Literacy Narratives**

Literacy narratives prepare students well for practicing imitation. Not only do they offer models students might want to emulate, but they also point out the benefit of imitating others. Frequently, characters describe the explicit and conscious use of imitation to achieve their literacy goals. Students who see a character they respect practicing imitation might naturally see themselves as next in line.



Literacy narratives can inspire productive imitation since our aspirations to be like our models make us want to sound like them. According to Barbara Couture, “Writing as the expression of our agency reflects a purposeful design for living, realized through emulating others whose actions represent the persons we would like to be and whom we wish to recognize that identity in us” (47). James Williams also thinks modeling has potential for motivating students: “Students who are inspired by the potential effect of a piece of writing learn a most central tenet: the power of delivering one’s meaning” (114). Students may well be unaware of how they have already absorbed the language of their models because, as Robert Brooke points out, we focus on the character of the person we admire, not their words: “Writers learn to write by imitating other writers, by trying to act like writers they respect” (23). Our admiration for someone naturally manifests itself through the way we try to copy that person. According to Brooke, “The forms, the processes, the texts are in themselves less important as models to be imitated than the personalities, or identities, of the writers who produce them. Imitation, so the saying goes, is a form of flattery: we imitate because we respect the people we imitate, and because we want to be like them” (23).

Since emulating is about developing character, one is less likely to notice linguistic and rhetorical appropriations compared to the sense of identity the new language affords. Nevertheless, such communicative influences can become deeply instilled and may represent the language one has most mastery over. Reading and writing literacy narratives can reveal the power our models have on the language we have developed. For students, this genre can help them see where they have used imitation and how they could exploit their models further. This could build confidence in that imitation is easy with familiar models. Also, when students are made aware of their past uses of imitation, they may appreciate their versatility in affecting different voices.

Working with one’s literacy role models can also be empowering in the way it establishes community with respected company. Identification bonds are likely to come more easily with those whom one admires. Students form a group with the models they have adopted as influences and styles to be imitated. At the same time, students may begin to perceive the usefulness of their developing literacy to other groups with which they identify. Deborah Mutnick points out that when a group is historically marginalized, speaking for the group as a representative member can be strategic. “[T]hough identity is mainly constructed and always multiplicitous,

### Literacy Narratives and Confidence Building

[many theorists] have nonetheless opted for a “strategic essentialism’ that recognizes the need to identify with and/or as members of groups struggling to speak and write themselves into history. The articulation of ‘I’ and the autobiographical impulse, in this sense, are never purely individual acts in that they insert the writer into public discourse, creating new social spaces for all group members” (81-82). Establishing identification with role models through literacy narratives allows for opportunities to advocate for one’s marginalized group.

Imitating other literacy narratives generates writing strategies that can be easily accessible. Students usually seek out the teacher’s example, if not for grounding in the classroom discourse, at least for the approbation that leads to high grades. But, as Nancy Welch points out, students need a “third factor’ of readings that supply other models [besides the teacher]” (44). Students who follow the examples in literacy narratives are likely to feel less pressure to please the teacher by affecting his or her voice. Models for “becoming literate” in literacy narratives, describe how people who, like the student, were outside of academia, brought themselves into it. These models would suggest different ways to bring the student’s particular circumstances into an academic forum.

But imitation does not mean just trying to sound like someone else or even borrowing his or her strategies. Imitation can involve a more personal devotion to those being admired. Barbara Couture believes imitation is most valuable when it moves into emulation: “Writers need to know quite a bit about what it is that others *do* when they communicate in writing so that they can act like them and, perhaps equally important, *be* like them in order to occupy a common field within which each other’s communications are heard and understood” (42). Couture suggests that by emulating other writers one can reach common ground with them. One’s personal literacy, as a subject, makes such level ground attainable. Awareness of how other writers moved toward academic literacy places the student’s stories in relation to the rest. Jacqueline Royster suggests in the “awake and listening” mindset, one should adopt an equivalent status to other communicators when writing or speaking (33). Following the examples of other literacy narratives can make the student realize how much better we communicate when we pay attention to others.

There is a strong case for using literacy narratives in the writing classroom. They model successful achievement of schooled literacy. They allow students who feel alienated by academia to identify with issues of disenfranchisement dramatized in the stories. They give a student examples of how

Caleb Corkery

language can transform one's life, a model any student then has the option to follow. However, there are a number of ways that this genre can hinder student progress in the classroom. While many students might find comfort in this genre, others are likely to encounter distress.

## **LITERACY NARRATIVES AND STUDENT ALIENATION**

### **Lack of Identification**

There is an inherent problem in claiming the ability to help “new” writers from the position of an “experienced” one. Literacy narratives can offer a bridge for the novice writer by modeling different pathways into academic literacy. But for some learning writers, the persona of the newly arrived literate might be more off-putting than comforting. Literacy narratives are likely to be more meaningful to students who already feel the potential power of school literacy than to those who feel far from participating in it. One of the problems inherent in using literacy narratives is the lack of identification offered to students who see themselves as not fitting into the expectations of classroom English.

Educators might be well guided by recalling the historical skepticism of professional writers instructing novice writers. The specialized skill of persuading others has throughout history been viewed with mistrust, as a cunning “knack” according to Plato. The practice of manipulating words brings to mind self-serving ends in the author. Just as we view askance political “spin-masters” these days, Plato questions the motives of a famous teacher of rhetoric in his book *Gorgias*: “Will you [Gorgias] then, if [your pupil] comes to you ignorant of [knowledge on a topic] enable him to acquire a popular reputation for knowledge and goodness when in fact he possesses neither, or will you be quite unable to teach him oratory at all unless he knows the truth about these things beforehand?” (39). Plato implies that teachers of rhetoric pretend they have expert knowledge of a topic in order to demonstrate persuasive skills. Part of the student's educational task is to catch on to the game of acting as if he knows something he actually doesn't. But from the student's point of view, until you are on the inside, sharing your skills with the other pretenders, the teacher's discourse appears foreign in every way.

During the early development of composition instruction, such doubts were still frequently expressed. Richard Whately, an Oxford University

### Literacy Narratives and Confidence Building

professor who published a widely read treatise on rhetoric in 1828, distances himself from composition instructors by claiming that essays meant to guide students “are almost invariably the production of *learners*; it being usual for those who have attained proficiency, either to write without thinking of any rules, or to be desirous (as has been said), and, by their increased expertness, able, to conceal their employment of art” (292). To Whately, the writing instructor is only slightly more trustworthy than Plato’s Gorgias. Though perhaps not deliberately withholding information from their students, writing teachers are unable to impart their craft because the mark of their skill level is to bypass the helpful steps that might tag the text as written by a novice.

These days, skepticism about the writing teacher is framed in the context of power dynamics. Students who sit in class hoping one day to join the educated graduates must trust that the teacher has a genuine interest in letting them into that group. Such trust erodes quickly when students perceive teachers as erecting a foreboding barrier of “correct” academic standards. And holding the power to judge students can tempt teachers to see themselves as the guardians of an educated class rather than as guides for those still on the path to becoming educated.

Mina Shaughnessy validates the distrust students are likely to have of their writing teachers. She describes how teachers of basic writers are likely to view their students as “natives” needing “conversion”: “Sensing no need to relate what [the writing instructor] is teaching to what his students know . . . the teacher becomes a mechanic of the sentence, the paragraph, and the essay.” Shaughnessy suggests that the worse a student’s skills are perceived to be, the farther the instructor will distance himself. And the teacher’s cover comes in the form, once again, of demonstrated skill: “Drawing usually upon the rules and formulas that were part of his training in composition, he conscientiously presents to his students flawless schemes for achieving order and grammaticality and anatomizes model passages of English prose to uncover, beneath brilliant, unique surfaces, the skeletons of ordinary paragraphs” (292).

David Bartholomae describes the alienating lens through which students perceive teachers as even more insidious. The instructor may have all the best intentions of meeting students on their level by “diving in,” as Shaughnessy recommends, but the divide is part of the structure of academia. Teachers may try to give assignments accommodated to the students’ interests, but “what these assignments fail to address is the central problem of academic writing, where a student must assume the right of speaking to

Caleb Corkery

someone who knows more about [the subject] than the student does . . . (595). The instructor is in the privileged position of presiding over the information. Or, as Plato might put it, appearing to know more. Bartholomae is bringing up a different point though. The writing instructor represents the possessor of the language of power. And the student must “see herself within a privileged discourse, one that already includes and excludes groups of readers. She must be either equal to or more powerful than those she would address. The writing, then, must somehow transform the political and social relationships between students and teachers” (594). Bartholomae points out the impossible position of the student: acting as if she is part of the group that—because of her apprentice status—she is separated from.

It is easy to imagine the novice student intimidated by the polished language of a published narrative. Instead of finding identification with the narrator, students might find confirmation for their alienated status. Narrators whom students might at first view as “just like me” trace a path in the story to becoming “one of them.”

Students in my classes have had such a reaction to literacy narratives. Reading sections of Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*, one student responded aloud shaking his head, “He was some smart, wasn’t he?” Others concurred, nodding their heads, still looking at the text. After reading parts of Keith Gilyard’s *Voices of the Self*, one student said Gilyard reminded him of his cousin who always got “A’s” in school but never had to try hard. For insecure students, following the example of these authors could surely be daunting.

From the position of academics, literacy narratives highlight the multi-cultural, multi-vocal features of academic discourse. To students who feel judged as outside of the discourse, literacy narratives can nevertheless present an unattainable, monolithic school standard. And anyone speaking from the enfranchised side might be hard to trust, much less identify with.

### **Subordination of Cultural Orality**

Literacy narratives treat the acquisition of school literacy as a goal, if not a triumph. The dramatic tension in these stories is driven by the desire or necessity of commanding the standard for writing correctly. These stories have set a precedent for venerating the culture of written communication. The importance of achieving schooled literacy, performed in both oral and written communication, has been narrated into the Western tradition as part of the individualist’s drive for “making it.” In George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion*, Eliza Doolittle ascends from a lower-class flower girl to an up-scale

### Literacy Narratives and Confidence Building

flower merchant by adopting the dialect of the literate British upper class. Countless American autobiographies describe education as a key component to becoming self-made.

Among African American writers, literacy has been equated with freedom, both spiritual and intellectual. Valerie Smith concisely depicts the meanings of literacy in several African American narratives:

As early as 1829, in his *Appeal in Four Articles*, David Walker spoke of the transforming power of education: "For colored people to acquire learning in this country, makes tyrants quake and tremble on their sandy foundation." As if to elaborate on this notion, Douglass remarks that learning to read and write provides "the pathway from slavery to freedom." Almost a century later, Richard Wright attributes his resistance to authority to the fact that reading introduced him to alternate ways of living. Maya Angelou suggests that the discovery of literature freed her from the traumatic after-effects of an episode of sexual molestation. And Malcolm X links his mental acuity to his rediscovery of reading during his jail term. (2)

So, where does the esteemed status of written literacy leave the oral communication of one's community? Silenced, according to Ronald and Suzanne B.K. Scollon. These researchers, who studied interethnic communication in Alaska, find that Athabaskans have great difficulty responding to written literacy because of the different consciousness that accompanies an oral culture: "Because learning to read and write in the essayist manner is in fact learning new patterns of discourse, literacy for an Athabaskan is experienced as a change in ethnicity as well as a change in reality set" (42).

Similarly, Geneva Smitherman describes the distinct cultural mindset expressed in Black English as unrecognized in school tests of literacy: "[T]oday's most effective black preachers, leaders, politicians, writers are those who rap in the black expressive style, appropriating the ritual framework of the Oral Tradition as vehicle for the conveyance of they political ideologies" (66). Smitherman suggests that linguists and teachers devoted to black education should devise a test for the mastery of this performative tradition, "rather than establishing linguistic remediation programs to correct a non-existent remediation" (66).

Gilyard explains that the privileging of Standard English puts speakers of Black English in the supposed position of needing to learn the school standard for upward mobility. But this argument sets up a dangerous myth

Caleb Corkery

of simple assimilation, according to Gilyard: “Social relations are a far more vital factor for Black students in school than differences of language variety. Black children, like all people, make decisions based on vested interests. If they were to perceive that the social dialectic were in their favor, learning another dialect could not be a major problem” (74). Adopting a Standard English dialect becomes a major problem when the cultural value of one’s oral language goes unacknowledged. Quoting Smitherman, Gilyard writes, “teaching strategies which seek only to put white middle-class English into the mouths of black speakers ain’ did nothing to inculcate the black perspective necessary to address the crises in the black community” (74). But Gilyard falls victim to the hegemony of written literacy despite his recognition of how the oral tradition has been unfairly devalued. Instead of regarding his oral skills for their distinct qualities, he sees them as funding for his writing skills. He explains how practicing his expression in conversation helped him with subsequent writings (108). He consciously developed his ability to write from the oral skills he possessed. This is the case throughout the genre. Repeatedly, these stories portray oral communication as a rehearsal for the more important written expression.

In literacy narratives, characters frequently sacrifice family and community relationships to succeed in school. Part of the trade-off for school literacy is the devaluing, or even loss of, one’s oral literacy. As he progresses in school, Richard Rodriguez notices that the intimate language he shared with his family has disappeared (25). Keith Gilyard creates a school identity in “Raymond” for his teachers and classmates; his real name he saves for his familiar relationships in his community (43). Maxine Hong Kingston and Min-Zhan Lu become silenced, unable to bring the communicative practices of their homes into the classroom. Villanueva claims to have lost his kinship with Chicanos once he chose to learn school literacy (40).

Using the genre of literacy narrative to initiate students into an unfamiliar composition classroom risks further alienating students whose communicative skills come out of an oral tradition. Literacy narratives do not confirm the value of oral expression that does not convert into writing. Cultural influences that shape distinctly oral communicators are not of use when learning the school standard, according to this genre. Instead, literacy narratives air the cultural obstacles and sacrifices that come with learning to communicate in school, while reinforcing the belief that those consequences are inevitable to achieving literacy.

## CONCLUSION

Among composition scholars, literacy narratives are often considered to be ideally suited to pedagogy for multicultural classrooms. They bring to light different cultural assumptions about what it means to be literate by demonstrating various paths toward that goal. Attitudes toward literacy, the meaning of being literate, the obstacles one faces in becoming literate—all change with each story about how this person has learned to read and write. Literacy narratives highlight the differences that undergird this common social goal. Though this genre may well suit the pedagogy needed to reach out to students from backgrounds distant from mainstream schooling, not all students will be comforted by such affirmation of their differences. As teachers, we should be careful about assigning a multicultural pedagogy to students we somehow divine as belonging to that category. Every student's cultural influences are multiple; as Esha Niyogi De and Donna U. Gregory point out, a student's culture "is a heteroglossic pastiche, a complex interplay of class; gender; geographic region; nationality; urban, suburban, or rural affiliation; and major socializing forces like popular culture, politics, and religion" (123).

Potentially, all students can benefit from observing the network of influences that produce an individual's view of being literate. The genre of literacy narrative puts rhetorical lessons into a wider societal context, a context in which students might be able to place themselves meaningfully. If the message comes through, in observing this genre, that literacy is ultimately shaped by the individual communicator, the pathway becomes open for the student's perspective. The school standard is likely to look less intimidating when seen as an element used to shape one's voice. Students become empowered when the lessons become personally useful. And since, as Lorri Neilsen points out, "most literate individuals will act out the remainder of their lives in contexts much broader than a schoolroom" (138), all students would benefit from genres that connect personal and social contexts. This is a key ingredient to successful literacy education, according to Neilsen: "When school literacy has little connection to literacy in the broader contexts of life, the chances are great that it cannot promote the development of self-understanding and self-control" (138).

Literacy narratives can provide a meaningful bridge into academic literacy in a number of ways. For those who can identify with the characters,



Caleb Corkery

literacy narratives privilege individual experience, provide social context for personal experience, and empower personal literacies. However, they also devalue oral literacies. This genre presumes the hegemony of written literacy. Oral expression is subsumed into the written. The oral part of one's culture becomes annexed as the precursor to writing. Students who follow the examples of this genre must also therefore subordinate the contribution of orality to their sense of being literate. Though literacy narratives document what most schools hope to produce, this approach may not suit students who have a rich tradition in oral expression. One alternative might be to steer students into narratives of lessons learned, moments of communicative mastery—oral and written. Such an approach could more fully exploit the confidence-building potential of literacy narrative pedagogies while diminishing the barrier they pose in privileging written (school) communication over the oral communication learned in one's home and community.

## Notes

1. Linda Brodkey interweaves a discussion of voice and authority in *Writing on the Bias*, highlighting the importance of writing from the authority of one's own experience. The collaborative essay by Beverly Clark (teacher) and Sonja Wiedenhaupt (student) ends with the student thanking the teacher for helping her write: "I don't think it is an easy task to make a student trust their own voice" (71).

2. In her chapter on literacy narratives in *On Writing*, Bishop explains how past experiences with literacy shape the communicators we are and will become. Scott claims that perhaps the most important benefit of excavating past literacy experiences for students is to validate their identities as writers. And Soliday argues that drawing from the students' everyday life through literacy narratives enhances their personal success as writers in the university (522).

3. The works of both Quintilian and Cicero dominated the teaching of rhetoric in English schools during the sixteenth-eighteenth centuries. Quintilian, who devoted his career to teaching rhetoric, believed that facility with speech largely depends upon the combined skills of listening and imitating.

### Works Cited

- Bartholomae, David. "Inventing the University." *When a Writer Can't Write: Studies in Writer's Block and Other Composing-Process Problems*. Ed. Mike Rose. New York: Guilford, 1985.
- Bishop, Wendy. "A Rhetoric of Teacher-Talk: Or How To Make More Out of Lore." In *Under Construction: Working at the Intersection of Composition Theory, Research, and Practice*. Eds. Christine Farris and Chris M. Anson. Logan: Utah State UP, 1998.
- . *On Writing: A Process Reader*. Boston: McGraw Hill, 2004.
- Brodkey, Linda. "Writing on the Bias." *College English* 56 (1994): 527-47.
- Brooke, Robert. "Modeling a Writer's Identity: Reading and Imitation in the Writing Classroom." *College Composition and Communication* 39 (1988): 23-41.
- Clark, Caroline, and Carmen Medina. "How Reading and Writing Literacy Narratives Affect Preservice Teachers' Understandings of Literacy, Pedagogy, and Multiculturalism." *Journal of Teacher Education* 51 (2000): 63-76.
- Collins, James L. *Strategies for Struggling Writers*. New York: Guilford, 1998.
- Couture, Barbara. "Modeling and Emulating: Rethinking Agency in the Writing Process." *Post-Process Theory: Beyond the Writing-Process Paradigm*. Ed. Thomas Kent. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1999.
- Crowley, Sharon, and Debra Hawhee. *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*. 2nd ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1999.
- De, Esha Niyogi, and Donna U. Gregory. "Decolonizing the Classroom: Freshman Composition in a Multicultural Setting." *Writing in Multicultural Settings*. Eds. Carol Severino, Juan C. Guerra, and Johnella E. Butler. New York: MLA, 1997.
- Eschholz, Paul A. "The Prose Models Approach: Using Products in the Process." *Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition*. Urbana: NCTE, 1980.
- Farmer, Frank. "Sounding the Other Who Speaks in Me: Toward a Dialogic Understanding of Imitation." *Saying and Silence: Listening to Composition with Bakhtin*. Logan: Utah State UP, 2001.
- Gilyard, Keith. *Voices of the Self: A Study of Language Competence*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1992.
- Golden, James L., and Edward P. J. Corbett. *The Rhetoric of Blair, Campbell, and Whately*. Ed. Lloyd F. Bitzer. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1990.
- Hesford, Wendy S. "Writing Identities: The Essence of Difference in Multicultural Classrooms." *Writing in Multicultural Settings*. Eds. Carol Severino, Juan C. Guerra, and Johnella E. Butler. New York: MLA, 1997.

- Howard, Rebecca M. "The Dialogic Function of Composition Pedagogy: Negotiating Between Critical Theory and Public Values." *Under Construction: Working at the Intersection of Composition Theory, Research, and Practice*. Eds. Christine Farris and Chris M. Anson. Logan: Utah State UP, 1998.
- Kelly, Michelle M. "The Education of African American Youth: Literacy Practices and Identity Representation in Church and School." *Constructions of Literacy: Studies of Teaching and Learning In and Out of Secondary Schools*. Eds. Elizabeth Moje and David O'Brien. Mahwah: LEA, 2001.
- Kingston, Maxine Hong. *Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*. New York: Knopf, 1976.
- Lisle, Bonnie, and Sandra Mano. "Embracing a Multicultural Rhetoric." *Writing in Multicultural Settings*. Eds. Carol Severino, Juan C. Guerra, and Johnnella E. Butler. New York: MLA, 1997.
- Lu, Min-Zhan. "From Silence to Words: Writing as Struggle." *College English* 49 (1987): 437-448.
- Mutnick, Deborah. "Rethinking the Personal Narrative: Life-Writing and Composition Pedagogy." *Under Construction: Working at the Intersections of Composition Theory, Research, and Practice*. Eds. Christine Farris and Chris M. Anson. Utah State UP, 1998.
- Neilsen, Lorri. *Literacy and Living: The Literate Lives of Three Adults*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1989.
- Nystrad et al. "Where Did Composition Studies Come From? An Intellectual History." *Written Communication* 10 (1993): 267-333.
- Plato. *Gorgias*. Trans. Walter Hamilton. New York: Penguin Classics, 1960.
- Quintilian. *Quintilian on the Teaching of Speaking and Writing*. Ed. James J. Murphy. Trans. John Selby Watson. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1987.
- Rodriguez, Richard. *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*. Boston: Godine, 1982.
- Royster, Jacqueline J. "When the First Voice You Hear Is Not Your Own." *College Composition and Communication* 47 (1996): 29-40.
- Rymes, Betsy. *Conversational Borderlands: Language and Identity in an Alternative Urban High School*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2001.
- Schuster, Charles I. "Mikhail Bakhtin as Rhetorical Theorist." *College English*. 47 (1985): 594-607.
- Scollon, Ronald, and Suzanne B.K. Scollon. *Narrative, Literacy and Face in Interethnic Communication*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1981.

Literacy Narratives and Confidence Building

- Shaughnessy, Mina. *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979, c1977.
- Smith, Valerie. *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1987.
- Smitherman, Geneva. *talkin that talk: Language, Culture and Education in African America*. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Soliday, Mary. "Translating Self and Difference through Literacy Narratives." *College English* 56 (1994): 511-26.
- Tate, Gary, Rupiper, Amy, and Schick, Kurt. *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies*. New York: Oxford UP, 2001.
- Troutman, Denise. "Whose Voice Is It Anyway? Marked Features in the Writing of Black English Speakers." *Writing in Multicultural Settings*. Eds. Carol Severino, Juan C. Guerra, and Johnnella E. Butler. New York: MLA, 1997.
- Villanueva, Victor Jr. *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*. Urbana: NCTE, 1993.
- Welch, Nancy. "Revising a Writer's Identity: Reading and 'Re-modeling' in a Composition Class." *College Composition and Communication* 47 (1996): 40-61.
- Williams, James D. *Preparing to Teach Writing*. Mahwah: LEA, 1998.
- Wright, Richard. *Black Boy (American Hunger): A Record of Childhood and Youth*. New York: Harper, 1998.