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CREATIVE WRITING PEDAGOGY:  
THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE IN HYBRID PROJECTS AS A MEANS TO EXPLORE  
INTERSECTIONALITY

By

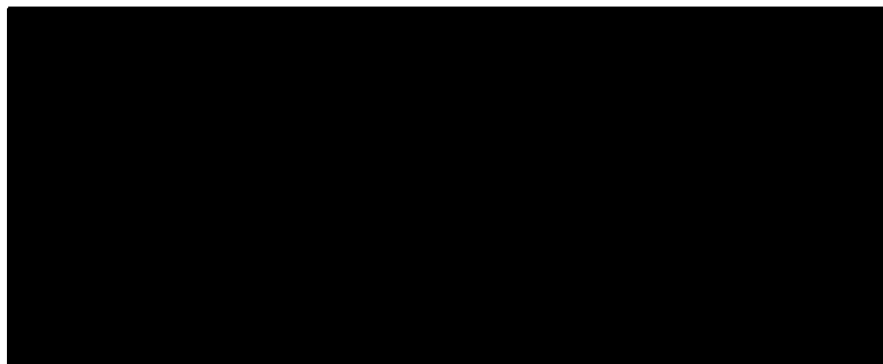
TANA G. YOUNG

THESIS

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2015

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## ABSTRACT

My thesis addresses the role of creative writing methods in fostering close observation, attention to detail, critical thinking and a keener awareness of intersectionalities in writing classrooms across disciplines, but most especially the humanities and social sciences. I contend that the “real work” of the academy is critical thinking. Further, using creative writing, specifically autobiographical narrative in FYC, anticipates multimodal projects and digital storytelling, all of which fosters creative and critical thinking.



“... [T]here are times—perhaps many times—when communication isn’t really the issue, and power is.”

— Gunther Kress, *Multimodality:*

*A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication*

“I have no future and the past has been destroyed. I am merely a solitary ruin. My heart is weighed down by the realization that I was destroyed in the very process of my birth. I was destroyed the very moment I received my destiny.”

— Shiina Rinzō

A PRELUDE: AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES  
& INTERSECTIONALITY

I

In an undergraduate Asian-American Literature class, the professor placed on the walls of the room a timeline that included major waves of Asian immigration into the U.S. from various countries: China, Korea, Japan and the Philippines. On that first day the professor asked us to place ourselves on the timeline in two ways: a mark for the year our ancestors entered America as immigrants, and a mark to signify if we'd ever lived abroad in an Asian country. On the timeline, WWII was dead center in the room, a veritable bull's eye; I placed my second mark perilously close to a storm I had no part in. The professor's head swiveled abruptly. He pointed to my mark.

“Who put this here?”

Timidly, I raised my hand.

That mark, a first immersion into the autobiographical narrative, would signal a significant paradigm shift in my understanding in a profound and detailed way. My private history would be uncomfortably intertwined with larger cataclysmic events, brought into immediate and sharp focus over the course of the semester. For the first time I saw myself existing within a social context, as part of a system. I was a child of the military, and until I was six-years-old I lived in Japan. This was just after the official ending of the occupation following WWII. A child, I had no idea why I'd arrived in such a place, among such a people. It might've been magic for all I knew. I didn't know why we had servants and seamstresses, custom clothing and private tutors who came and went from our home. All of this was unclear to me, along with the other endless questions of childhood.

Since that time, I have often examined the so-called role of subservience in Japanese culture. I wondered if perhaps this position was an ancient art form delicately practiced. More likely, the gentle treatment of American children was an act of a paid employee. However, given the circumstances of WWII, those who treated me with such kindness hold merit in this story.

I'd never been able to reconcile what I read in history books with my memories of a people who treated me with such care. For many years I believed that these memories were separate from a connection with war or history in its larger application. But, of course we aren't ever separate. We can't be. WWII brought the American military presence to Japan, the defeated enemy of the U.S. Though the occupation officially ended in 1952, the Japanese endured our military presence for dozens of years beyond that date. Americans were treated like royalty as was befitting the rulers of the vanquished.

## II

My second experience with autobiographical narrative came in the same Asian-American Lit class and included collaborative elements — writing and reading as extended forms of speaking and listening. One of our assignments for the class was a service-learning project for a documentary film entitled *In Time of War*. We were each assigned a taped interview to transcribe the personal narrative of a Japanese internee from Minidoka Internment Camp. For two hours, I typed the mundane day-to-day details of camp life. In the third hour, the woman's voice began to break. Then she began to sob uncontrollably.

“I know why Americans hate us. The Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.”

Her shame was personal as if she'd somehow been responsible. She was just twelve-years-old when Pearl Harbor was bombed. What had she to do with it?

Japanese-American families lost everything: their businesses, bank accounts and personal property. Without due process, the families living on the western coast of Washington State were removed from their homes and sent to live in Jerome, Idaho. The woman's story on the tape was connected to my story, and we were both connected to WWII through accidents of birth, proximity and governments. I contend that without hearing her autobiographical narrative and without the admittance of my mark on the timeline, this understanding would not have been possible.

### III

My experiences with autobiographical narrative continued. In a theory based essay writing class, the professor introduced a form of essay writing, fictocriticism or interpretive biography, to combine and blur the boundaries between fiction, theory and criticism. Here we were asked to meld elements of our personal stories with the stories of others, merge them into a single artifact, the result of which is the telling of stories as a way to create an argument. This experimental essay form allowed me to place myself in proximity to major cultural figures in history, in this case, to women who had shaped my identity. For this essay, I created the timeline and I inserted myself into it. My subjects for a feminist paper on shaming were Marilyn Monroe, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and Wednesday Addams.

The essay required the usual academic basics such as research and multiple drafting, merging seemingly disparate components: fact and fiction, ethnographic observation, archival history, literary theory and memoir. For this assignment, wherever I noted similarities or contrasts, connections between the lives of my subjects and my own lived history, I made notations. Out of that new space I created a new story. Though the women in the transcribing project and I had never met, would never meet, their combined and

continual presence in media shaped how I perceived the feminine as I was growing up. Both women were commodities.

For the project I melded my autobiographical narrative with theirs. I added a third female celebrity who signified the compilation of characters and me all rolled into one: a cartoon character created by Charles Addams for *The New Yorker*. I was nine-years-old when I became acquainted with the magazine. I would often slip into the library to avoid being beaten up, something modern women's magazines failed to address. I spent a lot of time in that library and Wednesday Addams became my symbol of grim endurance. Stuart Hall writes, "It is possible for a viewer perfectly to understand both the literal and the connotative inflection given by a discourse but to decode the message in a globally contrary way" (517).

#### IV

A final student example of autobiographical narrative and collaboration examined a subversive form of essay in which we were asked to use 'taunting' as our topic in an investigation of J. L. Austin's speech performance acts. For the assignment, we were sent out to taunt someone and then to write about it, including the outcomes of this verbal act. Some chose to taunt males who were smaller in size, or women who were buxom, or those racially different from themselves. I chose to taunt my youngest daughter, Elizabeth, fourteen-years-old at the time. She barely noticed.

In each of these examples of autobiographical writing the personal collides with the public. Through the act of self-writing I gained a greater awareness of terms and ideas, theories and criticisms. Ideas were no longer distant. They hit home, often perilously close to the center of my understanding. I contend that without personal essay these realizations would not have taken place.

Meditation XI: Whence can we take a better argument, a clearer demonstration, that all the greatness of this world is built upon the opinion of others and hath in itself no real being, nor power of subsistence, than from the heart of man?

— John Donne

## CHAPTER ONE

My early education began in the visual arts. For well over a dozen years I studied fine art, graphic design, illustration and art history. In fact, art and imagery informs my view of the world. In the details of the exquisite tenderness of line, extraordinary color and redolent richness of three-dimensional form on two-dimensional canvas, I find deeper meaning — sublime meaning. However, the written word, especially poetry and personal essay, also began to play a significant role in my life. I now write poetry and creative nonfiction, and by that I mean a form of autobiographical essay called memoir.

For me, both poetry and creative nonfiction offer the rich resonance of words holding a sound sensibility and a sense of truth that pings on the interior self. Because of an early immersion into the visual arts, my poems and essays are rife with sensory details: color, texture, the fragrance of spring on the Alaskan wind, coming-of-age, what it means to be human. My experiences with art have influenced my writing by adding details grounded in the seen and felt, in my lived experience. In poetry I use associative leaps that connect dissimilar ideas that lead the reader to a resounding conclusion. The visual operates in this way too. Ultimately, however, I view myself primarily as a visual learner.

Over the years I have begun to more fully realize the interconnectedness of the arts. Music, painting, cinema, theater, dance, and creative writing all have as their source the same creative impulse. As an instructor, as well as a tutor in the Writing Center, I have also seen how creativity can help students write better papers, whether these papers are about history, or biology, or art. A broader definition of creativity transcends prevailing notions of what constitutes good writing. As Albert Einstein has written, “All religions, arts and sciences are branches of the same tree.”

It is clear to most people today that science, along with technology, the practical application of science, is the privileged branch of this metaphorical tree. We see this in governmental priorities, in the veneration of all things technical by younger generations, and, most importantly for my purposes, in the academy. Recently I attended a Writing Center conference in Nashville where the keynote speaker drew a sharp line between those who tell ‘their little stories’ and those who exist in the more adult world of the sciences. The chasm fairly yawned open in front of me. The creaking and rumbling of old mindsets was audible.

I see this breach in the way that creative writing — poetry, drama, fiction and creative nonfiction — is viewed as inferior, not only by scholars in the so-called “hard” sciences, but also by academics in English departments. Although many English professors do utilize a personal, imaginative approach in teaching composition and literature, as they also encourage creativity in the writing of their students, most seem to adhere to notions that creative writing belongs only in creative writing classrooms. While this attitude has shifted in the past few decades, a dichotomy between teaching creative writing and composition writing still exists.

On one side of the boundary line are composition teachers who explicitly teach creative writing techniques and/or encourage the use of imagination and the personal “I” in student writing. The most well known proponent of this approach is Peter Elbow whose work, *Writing Without Teachers*, originally published in 1973, has influenced several generations of both teachers and writers. On the other side of the divide are those who believe that creative writing has no place in the composition classroom, that students need to learn academic language to survive in the academy and who often argue for stricter writing standards across the curriculum. David Bartholomae is perhaps the most well known



proponent of this group. His article, “Inventing the University,” published in 1986, is still one of the most widely cited works in the field of composition and rhetoric.

However, divides are often blurry at the center. Elbow, for instance, has acknowledged the audience, and more recently Bartholomae has moved slightly on the issue of the authority of the writer. Both favor process pedagogy but Bartholomae’s loyalties still reside with the academy as the primary audience for college writing. Not surprisingly, Elbow’s loyalties still lie with the author when determining how meaning is made. Bartholomae’s argument that composition students ought to write in the language of the academy goes so far as to declare that this is the primary, if not, *sole function* of writing within the academy. In “Writing with Teachers: A Conversation with Peter Elbow,” Bartholomae says, “I want to argue that academic writing is the [*real*] work of the academy. I also want to argue for academic writing as a key term in the [*study of writing*] and the [*practice of instruction*] (Bartholomae 65). He says as much in “Writing with Texts: A Conversation with David Bartholomae,”

I think of composition as ... a course where students have to learn to work with materials that aren’t written for them and that they’re not prepared to read. ... Some people say it’s because we have to make them good citizens. What I have said is that it’s to prepare them to do the work of the academy....” (Williams)

Brian Schwartz, in “Fear of Narrative,” claims that the debate between Bartholomae and Elbow is of “central importance in the field of composition studies, one that speaks to timeless questions of narrative and pedagogy in the writing classroom ... a crucial theoretical divide, not just in comp theory but in American higher education” (431). Their opposing viewpoints, Schwartz asserts, are rifts dividing the entire academy. Those who align

themselves with Bartholomae may do so because of traditions dating back twenty-five hundred years to Socrates and Plato.

These early philosophers held that art was imitative of nature and thus, the lesser form of reality, not the thing itself: “The arts of painting, poetry, music, dancing, and sculpture, Socrates says, are all imitations” (Abrams 7). While the thinking behind this categorization of the arts has evolved over the centuries, going beyond its original reasoning and pecking order, what does or does not constitute proper academic discourse, has not.

M. H. Abrams, a theorist whose remarks support the arguments of Elbow, in “Orientation of Critical Theories,” gives an accounting of the origin of these classical views of creativity and asserting that this designation acts as a form of negation and censorship because, so the thinking goes, the representation or appearance of a thing was not considered the truth, and thus could evoke only an emotional response and never a reasoned one. Plato’s views of art held that because “... art imitates the world of appearance and not of Essence, [thus] it follows that works of art have a lowly status in the order of existing things” (Abrams 8). These early dichotomies — emotion versus reason, representation versus the universe, and falsity versus truth — are classic binaries long since overturned and their points of contention, if not forgotten, are mostly nullified. Yet traces remain as biases that continue to impose a negation of creative works as neither scholarly nor academic.

However, when Aristotle addressed this issue, he reinterpreted the creative differently than either Socrates or Plato. Aristotle acknowledged subtleties in determining distinctions between forms:

A salient quality of [Aristotle’s] *Poetics* ... [is] the way it considers a work of art in various external relations, affording each its due function as one of the ‘causes’ of the

work. This procedure results in a scope and flexibility that ... resist[s] a ready classification into any one kind of orientation. (Abrams 7-8)

The 'cause' most clearly cogent in the matter of creative writing in the classroom is the one that allows forms to interact with other forms as an agency of change or movement. Aristotle's efficient or moving cause works as a stepping-stone in this argument. Abrams' reinterpretation of Aristotle allows expressivism and creative writing a toehold in the wall. Donald C. Jones, in his work, "John Dewey and Peter Elbow: A Pragmatist Revision of Social Theory and Practice" asserts that Dewey's pragmatism melds with Elbow's expressivism and allows for the use of Aristotle's efficient cause. Expressivism, with its inclusion of creative writing as one form, linked to pragmatism as another form, ultimately gains stronger ground in the academy. Pragmatism and expressivism connect with Aristotle's efficient cause, opens the door to externality, specifically in the shared academic concerns of audience awareness and revision.

Abrams also points out that Aristotle's broadened definition of creativity, when merged with the externality of expressivism and pragmatism, can rightfully make claims that ideas are true insofar as they are useful in specific situations, in this case writing classrooms. In other words, pragmatism suggests that we use whatever works, avoiding unnecessary and unproductive either/or binaries. Pragmatism situates expressivism and creative writing in FYC as methods that work in places where strict logic cannot.

However, Bartholomae has continued to disagree with the role of autobiographical narrative. He seems to believe that personal essay waters down the purity of academic writing because it employs less exacting means and relies on immeasurable and subjective attributes such as emotion, intuition and the individual experience, privileging these over classical ideas of absolute truth and the necessity of following long-established academic

traditions. Bartholomae clarifies his position when he writes: “the writing that passes as currency in the academy ... [is] stuffy, pedantic, the price of a career” (Bartholomae 62). Bartholomae also believes that students ought to write in the language of the academy and that this is its sole function. His arguments against expressivism, or more specifically against autobiographical narrative, focus on its use in FYC classrooms, and if truth be told, the presence of autobiographical elements in student writing anywhere beyond the creative writing classroom.

Although what Bartholomae says makes *logical* sense, he forgets several important points beyond his peculiar milieu. Brian Schwartz criticizes his perspective saying that, Bartholomae “is a teacher who takes great pains to keep autobiographical narratives out of the writing classroom and ultimately decides that authority [or authorship] is not as important as cold logic” (431). Bartholomae stands accused of erring on the classical side of writing, privileging the perspective of the academy over the voice of the student.

Bartholomae points to the dangers of autobiographical narrative, one of which is, “*without* the readings (where, in a sense, you were writing on your own) [self writing] might well produce each week only more of the same, the same story written in the same style” (Bartholomae and Petrosky 749). He believes, for instance, that overly autobiographical writing in the classroom can lead to navel gazing and lack of growth, that the values of expressivism are less measurable, and when all is said and done, might not lead to improved academic writing. Bartholomae is also concerned with FYC students having too much freedom before they know the basics of effective college writing. His remarks suggest that first person narrative written by students should be connected with a reading assignment. He writes that such acts of self-writing should “fore-ground the relationship between [one’s]

work and the work of others, to think about how and why and where [one is] prepared to write autobiographically” (Bartholomae and Petrosky 749).

Some of these concerns should be taken seriously. Popular culture is certainly full of navel gazing, so the fear is a valid one. Bartholomae is not by any means the only critic of Peter Elbow and expressivism. For instance, Brian Schwartz also finds fault with Elbow, whom, he says, embodies all of the failings of expressivism. Elbow is “... a man who senses romance in the process of writing, who privileges the storytellers perspective above the academic’s, but then convinces himself that he’s the only real storyteller (or worthwhile story subject) in the room” (Schwartz 431). For Schwartz, this points directly to the perceived narcissism inherent in creative writing. This is a legitimate concern for college students who are, many of them, already in the throes of self-absorption.

John Briggs, in “Peter Elbow, Kenneth Burke, and the Idea of Magic,” takes a different stance from Schwartz. Though he considers Peter Elbow’s expressivist ideas naïve, he credits Elbow with being conscious of foundational issues and ideas underpinning writing in the academy. Elbow’s goals for the writing classroom are especially timely, Briggs says, because “it has become harder and harder to cast any story, let alone the story of education, in a setting that is free, edenic or utopian” (Briggs 364). The naïvete of Elbow may be his sense of the possible even when face-to-face with the probable. In better economic times, for instance, a bevy of instructors with ample resources helped their students broaden their capabilities. Those days have come to an abrupt close.

Though not especially optimistic about what the future will bring, Briggs’s remarks nonetheless hold the ring of truth. In fact recently even Bartholomae has softened his earlier stance and has begun to acknowledge the voice of the author speaking, to hearken to the words of the storyteller. He now considers the goals and purposes of the author and includes

them as vital elements in the reading process, as he also considers the form that writing takes. Bartholomae admits that writing in the academy often serves a defined curriculum but not always the needs of the student.

It is interesting to note that Bartholomae now espouses ideas similar to those of Elbow, albeit indirectly and only incrementally, even as he continues to tiptoe nervously around the dangerous edges of autobiographical essay. For instance, Bartholomae spotlights a student's ability to reflect in writing about the writing process. This *seems* to open the door to the autobiographical narrative, at least an inch. However, in spite of his move toward the center on this issue, Bartholomae continues to more or less deny the autobiographical narrative essay. He writes, in *Ways of Reading*, for instance, that, "Autobiographical writing is often used for purposes of display or self-promotion, or to further (rather than question) an argument" (Bartholomae and Petrosky 749).

Though expressivism, pragmatism and creative writing methods may seem subversive to notions of conformity in the academy, such as those that Bartholomae represent, they focus holistically on students as diverse individuals and take their distinctive lives into consideration. On homogenous campuses, perhaps the autobiographical narratives are all the same, but on diverse campuses, they differ. Expressivism, pragmatism and creative writing methods open a dialogue in FYC classroom that make room for a deeper understanding, allow for differing opinions and viewpoints, and pave the way for the inclusion of creative elements in the writing classroom.

We know that open dialogue can become a site of resistance that empowers students from non-dominant populations. We also know that writing is always subjective and that it already carries the weight of burdensome perspectives. Along with discussion and dialogue,

instructors rightfully situate personal elements in writing and creative endeavors as places of resistance that subvert archaic claims and act as interventions in institutional conformity.

In fact, the more students take responsibility for the spoken, the demonstrated and the written conversation in the classroom the better. Moreover, Bartholomae's perspective is problematic because our students need far more advanced skill sets when they leave the university than how to write papers that approximate by varying degrees the traditional academic essay. The economic fallout of the larger culture, the place where our students will ultimately do battle, is well beyond the fix of the five-paragraph essay, no matter how well protected it is by certain quadrants.

What resources we can offer FYC students we ought to utilize: computer lab availability and creatively conceived and constructed assignments. The creativity inherent in multimodal projects, which I will begin to address in Chapter Three, includes a far broader range of skill sets than the single dimensional paper written in isolation, as issue equally important in the conversation about the future of our students.

Other theorists have also addressed the necessity of privileging the voice of the student speaking in the classroom, as well as the voice of the author in the written. In *Postcards from the Edge*, Jane Tompkins alludes to the overwhelming authority of professors in the classroom to collapse, disrupt and change the direction of conversation. What we say and think matters more than what our students say or think. Instructors must find ways to expand and open the dialogue of the students so that we hear their voices and they see we're listening. Academic writing is one way of speaking, but perhaps allowing autobiographical elements within student writing in FYC and beyond is a way for the students to speak using their own voices.

Tompkins also suggests radical new ways of making meaning between teachers and authority figures, as well as between teachers and students. She writes imaginary messages and letters, epistolary forms, to various members of the academic community as a way to *get at* the idea of the author and the reader. In “Postcard #3” she addresses an “All-wise, Imaginary Mentor” (Tompkins 450). She also writes about the importance of paying attention to the students beyond cramming information into their heads. She writes that, “... [k]nowledge, for me, became something, ‘over there upon the shelf’” (450). This isn’t an abandonment of expertise, nor is it a press to forget the reasons why students enrolled in the class in the first place. Rather, Tompkins reminds us that our students are individuals seated in a room with us. We’re not just partaking in a system, playing sage to a group of lesser beings, we’re also humans intersecting. She suggests that our varied experiences ought to be acknowledged.

In “Postcard #3,” she asks the mythological mentor, perhaps the *uber mensch* of academic writing, for permission to become better acquainted with her students as a primary task, a relationship long forbidden or ignored. Her creative approach spotlights the problems of teaching from a formulaic perspective with only one goal in mind. Tompkins advocates that instructors remain creatively open and write assignments that also remain creatively open. This seems a pragmatic approach to the issues of student writing. Equally important to this conversation, Tompkins views writing that is stripped of personal or emotional content as unrelenting.

She continues to address the conundrum of the instructor role inside the classroom, saying, “... when it’s not the teacher who is always calling the shots, the interests of the individual students have a chance to emerge” (Tompkins 657). Positive examples of authority in writing classrooms allow the right mix of creativity, freedom and academic



elements to foster maximum growth in students. Tompkins warns us that unless our students have some significant connection with their work, what we do is an empty labor that ends up destroying the specimen we seek to save (Tompkins 658). We can force them to accept the terms of our unyielding conditions, but it doesn't necessarily follow that they will come away with much that helps them on their journey.

Adding to Tompkins's claims about misused academic authority, Paulo Freire addresses the sometimes stagnate nature of the relationship between instructors and their students. He poses the historical truth of instructors as the most important person in the room. These teachers 'fill' students up with their sizeable wisdom and believe that their words are the most significant in the lives of others (Bartholomae and Petrosky 730). Like Tompkins, Freire also asks what can be done to allow our students to learn from us without erasing their lived experiences. The answer seems to lie, at least in part, in creative methods that meld the curriculum with student needs in ways that include their own stories, told in their own voices.

Expressivism and creative writing allows writers access to their own truth. These myriad truths, applied to multiple topics, are easily admissible in FYC classrooms. Expressivism also encourages individuality in thinking and focuses on the personal growth of the student, privileging content over form, at least at the outset, *as a way to begin*. Elbow has recognized the mysterious quality of the individual voice — writing based on the observations of the writer. However, though expressivism encourages writers to write *for* themselves, Elbow cautions novice writers against writing *to* themselves.

Jane Tompkins also encourages students to be creative in their modes of presentation, to be free to express their feelings and to talk about their own experiences whenever they seem relevant (Tompkins 658). Creative ideas are applicable in writing

classrooms because they bring students closer to the articulation of complex ideas by first having them write and speak from personal perspectives. Novice writers should be allowed to situate themselves within topics because this deeper immersion facilitates greater critical understanding.

Theorists who also support the arguments of expressivism, Robert Sternberg and Todd Lubart, in *Defying the crowd: Cultivating Creativity in a Culture of Conformity*, examine the ways that institutions — business and education — consistently squelch creative ideas rather than make opportunities for creativity. It is fair, I think, to contend that many writing instructors have encouraged institutional conformity through rote adherence to rules, seeing in the rules evidence of mastery in craftsmanship, privileging a strict definition of conventionalized form over concerns of originality, creativity or agency, and refusing to acknowledge elements of individual experience as appropriate for academic writing. In this case, the institutional animal speaks both *for* and *to* the student, repeating the message of conformity.

By distancing the student from their own words rather than asking them to imaginatively place themselves closer to the center, students become outsiders in their own writing process, as they often are in their own lives, with others having the power to define and label. In “Postcard #12,” Tompkins advocates that professors get out of the students’ way and let them take what they need from the classroom (Tompkins 454). Sternberg and Lubart assure us that the creative amongst us routinely act to subvert institutional conformity. Though this may create tension for the institutional status quo, creativity is not antithetical to critical thinking.

Roland Barthes reminds us that the stories of the world are infinite. However, we also know that those to whom experiences happen are not usually the ones writing the narratives. It is an unfortunate fact of life that human history is written by the conquerors, not the conquered. In “Traditional Knowledge and Humanities: A Perspective of a Blackfoot,” Leroy Little Bear writes, for instance, that, “There are ‘tons’ of studies of Aboriginal peoples by government, missionaries, and social scientists. However, the majority if not all of those studies are done from a Eurocentric perspective based on Western paradigms” (Little Bear 519).

Even if we believe that Bartholomae never meant to place limitations on the rights of non-majority students, it is likely that he believed that the system of the majority would control the terrain for much longer. He writes:

To offer academic writing as something else is to keep this knowledge from our students, to keep them from confronting the power politics of discursive practice, or to keep them from confronting the particular representations of power, tradition and authority reproduced whenever one writes. (Bartholomae 64)

The real divide between student populations is the majority versus the minority demographic on college campuses. Bartholomae’s desire for confronting the white power structure is admirable. He makes a good point that, indeed, the goals of the academy cannot be free from the influences of culture. That said, we can agree, I think, that earlier conceptions of writing within the academy were surely failures to envision deeper, more imaginative writing practices.

Further, shouldn’t we consider the journeys our students have taken to get to us? This is especially true for those coming from the far ends of the learning spectrum. Though

a few arrive in our classrooms with all the pieces of the college puzzle in their expensive backpacks, many more arrive ill-prepared to write well-crafted essays of any kind. Learning to write well is a steep climb, especially for those with deficiencies, which may have been inflicted by the systems at work up to the point where they entered our domain. Bright students may come to us without proper reading or writing skills. This includes first generation students, international or immigrant students, those with developmental delays or disruptions to their learning, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), or Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The range of needs in a diverse classroom can be daunting and instructors rightfully argue that they have only so much time to teach the basics.

Even so, Elbow's inclusion of a multiplicity of voices arguably fits the goals of FYC. Further, he anticipates creative writing projects in a way that Bartholomae, for all his attention to academic authority, does not. Bartholomae may have conceived of a classroom setting that focused on non-majority strategies, but he has not included student voices, collaborative learning, or creative elements, specifically the autobiographical narrative. A larger cultural climate now requires many more of these skillsets. By opening the door to a broader definition of writing and discourse communities, students are introduced to multiple ways of approaching writing and thinking tasks. Such concepts morph easily into assignments with creative modes of articulation, allowing for maximum participation from a broader spectrum of students, with a broader application once the students leave our classrooms.

I'll also be the first to concede that too much freedom in beginning writing classes can be risky. Novice writers need rules, just as they also require well-crafted prompts, rubrics and plenty of hand holding in one-to-one conferences. Only partially tongue-in-cheek, however, I contend that breaking them of the habit of the dastardly five-paragraph essay is

itself a creative act. Teaching the essay-in-a-box does little to challenge our students to see or think in new ways. The dubious and formulaic five-paragraph essay form has failed miserably to bring the student to writing proficiency, critical thinking, creativity or originality. How can it accomplish any of these goals, when its primary concern is with the rules of form? This formulaic approach renders student writing prescriptive, perfectly formed essays essentially about nothing.

Worse, by denying the authority of the student voice in writing, we fail, sociologist Laurel Richardson writes in *Fields of Play*, “to resolve . . . the dichotomy between the observer and the observed” (20). We must see the necessity of acknowledging students’ rights to think differently from us, which may be slightly anxiety provoking for everyone, but this is the place where *our* learning as well as theirs, takes place. How far we stretch our assignments to include creative elements, such as autobiographical narrative, beyond the status quo depends on any number of factors, all of which are under our control. As instructors, we are free to allow only so much deviation from the agreed upon forms and then only by measurable degrees, under strict conditions.

There are those, of course, who have a stake in maintaining things as they are. It’s far easier, for one. How much digression from established forms may be decided inside the classroom, but such decisions have implications well beyond its borders. Paradoxically, Bartholomae admits that when, “[arguing] for academic writing as part of an undergraduate’s training, or as a form or motive to be taught/examined in the curriculum . . . It is much easier to find examples or phrases to indicate our sense of corporate shame or discomfort” (Bartholomae 63). He speaks of those who teach composition writing as though it is not their *real* work. We know that this is why the inherently powerful is sometimes couched in

archaic language, inaccessible especially to non-majority and first generation students. This too makes things easier.

If outmoded forms prevail and instructors impart only the formulaic to their students, their participation holds little meaning. These practices make students mere sponges or blank tablets. In such an arena, imaginative construction goes against all established views.

However, in this setting, Bartholomae also takes to task those who disparage the teaching of composition writing as beneath their considerable talents (Bartholomae 63). I agree with him here. Because nearly every student is compelled to take FYC, English instructors are called to invest in student writing. The academy also claims a vested interest. Success in the academy hinges on the student ability to converse in logically and coherently constructed, well documented and properly cited papers.

However, the greater culture also requires that professionals communicate well through oral and visual presentations and, just as often, to work collaboratively. The unsaid factors embedded everywhere are the requirements for creative and critical thinking. Creatively constructed projects employ multiple layers, and each of those includes a series of complex steps, much like Russian matryoshka (nesting) dolls. How much complexity to introduce and when is truly a question of balance, dependent on class dynamics, class size and abilities of the students. With the right helps, students can be led gently and safely into creative arenas where they learn to articulate and demonstrate understanding of complex ideas by the telling of their own stories.

It seems to me that if the game has been tipped in favor of creativity in writing, it is because the culture both within and without the academy is changing. When we empower our students to use creative tools in service to their deeper learning it is because this is the demand of the world in which we all now live. Reflection focuses on our students' differing

worldviews as it also focuses on their writing process. That is to say, we need to make room for multiple voices. Self-writing becomes crucial here, not an aside or an addendum, but as a primary step in our curriculums. Further, acknowledgement of a broad range of perspectives is an important requirement, not just a passing phase in the academy.

Furthermore, in “Thinking About Modality,” Selfe and Takayoshi write that because we live “[i]n an increasingly technological world, students need to be experienced and skilled in both reading and composing in multiple modalities.” The authors contend that composition, as a discipline, must also adapt if the field is to remain relevant to our students. They argue that exposure to multimodal projects is compelling to students, and that using multimodality in FYC is “consistent with progressive principles of education.” In other words, it has sound pedagogy as its basis.

It’s our job then to help our students connect what they do in our classrooms with the culture in which they live and will return. It is also our job to help them articulate their good ideas in writing, as well as to help them creatively express those ideas. Thus, the *real* work of the academy is to help students develop critical thinking that goes well beyond formulaic definitions, even if it means blurring the lines between the academic and the creative realms, the public and the private, the solitary and the collective. In order to do this, we must acknowledge that academic writing is a construct of the academic world for the academic world, existing in no other realm and serving no other purpose; these facts make our requirements for strict form somewhat artificial.

We need to make sure our assignments are useful to the future of our students. The real world problems facing them require that we offer them more than another paper to write. The landscape has changed drastically since Bartholomae’s early landmark discussions with Peter Elbow. Composition writing now must utilize strategies that acknowledge societal

changes in student demographics on college campuses, for instance. These complexities now also include technological demands.

Throughout my thesis, I discuss key areas of scholarship and research that focuses on the role of creative writing methods in the classroom, specifically autobiographical narrative, in the writing of various disciplines across the academy, especially in the humanities and social sciences. Finally, I have also used my personal experiences as a student, an instructor and as a Writing Center tutor where applicable.



At heart ... composition studies ... is therefore by necessity a creative art. Our work, as writers, teachers, scholars, administrators cannot be other than creative. ... Because our world is not static, our involvement in it is, ideally, an active ongoing process, rather than a reactive accommodation to the status quo.

— Lynn Bloom; *Composition Studies as Creative Art*

## CHAPTER TWO

Autobiographical narrative carries degrees of difference depending on its use: life story, life writing, life narrative, self-life, fictioneering, biomythography, or the more traditional memoir, just to name a few. Labels suggest a broad range of uses. Writing about the self also carries vastly different connotations from person to person, depending on the circumstances of the writing. Norman Denzin in *Interpretive Biography* offers us yet another list. Self-writing is expressed “in a variety of ways, including . . . myths, novels, films, scientific articles, dramas performed, songs sung, and lives written” (33). All people engage in storytelling.

For the purposes of this thesis, I am interested in the form of self-writing within the classroom. In other words, my focus is on first person narrative as a way for students to figure out what they think, feel or know in connection to the larger topic under discussion. Self-writing in this sense is the means to discover one’s thoughts about a matter.

The individual voice of the student is important. So too is the power of the collective — how we make meaning together in conversation. Beyond a basic definition of the term ‘creative’ as the use of imagination in the production of original work, Joshua Shenk asks and answers questions crucial to this discussion. In so doing, he offers a general definition of the umbrella term, ‘creativity.’ Shenk wonders where creativity comes from. A traditional answer is the lone genius who operates in isolation. Shenk contends that the traditional role of individual genius has as its core the exclusion of many, allowing only a privileged few to participate.

Collaboration is an aside in this conversation about autobiographical narrative, but I have included it here because it is also a means of creative exploration. Creativity is not the sole domain of the select few. Expressivism and pragmatism includes collaboration just as they also include creative writing methods in FYC. The melding of voices creates a more interesting conversation than the solitary voice of the isolated genius.

Further, collaboration can be considered as the place where self-writing is in conversation with the writing of others — the extended form of speaking and listening. When this conversation is merged creatively with imagery and sound, using digital mediums, the results of such a conversation is a multilayered project that transcends a single paper written in isolation, especially one that refuses the first person. The exploration of student perspective presented in a variety of modes, demands greater critical thinking skill, attention to detail and a deeper engagement in the topic.

#### CHALLENGES & PROBLEMS WITH NARRATIVE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Many students love creative writing and thrive in a creative environment. However, there are those at the other end of the spectrum, the students who want nothing to do with writing as a creative endeavor. Writing may not be their declared major, and thus, is seemingly unimportant to their stated trajectory. These students often make their views about creative writing abundantly clear. For these students, FYC, as an institutional demand, is merely a box to be checked on the way to a degree in something else. These students are not interested in writing beyond the formulaic, and then only as a means to an end.

Even so, we must accomplish the rudiments of good writing and critical thinking in the time we have allotted with our writing students. Such tools as we possess must be placed

at their disposal. The ones they choose to carry forward will depend on their goals for writing. By making the space safe for writing, however, all students will choose to write. It is after all why they have signed up for the class.

This approach is not about foisting creative writing on students against their will. Rather, it is a way to make sure that students are proficient with a wider array of writing tools than they would have had opportunity to explore on their own, even as we also acknowledge their freedom not to use everything we offer. Further, when we introduce creative writing methods into FYC classes, we do so because it is reasonable to expect that our students will ultimately want to come away more enriched than if they had simply replicated their high school practice of writing the formulaic five-paragraph essay.

In FYC, the exploration of complexities comes in the places of shared vision and also in the places of articulated difference. College students learn from being immersed in social complexity, to “wallow in ambiguity” (Fredrick). That complexity *may* include embracing the creative side of writing as the means to explore their ideas about new topics. Another way to state this is that students must learn to live in the tension of not yet knowing all of the answers to complex issues, as they also learn to use self writing to figure out what they think, and as the means to add their voices and stories to the mix.

#### USING AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE AS A WAY TO HELP STUDENTS BEGIN

The autobiographical essay form in FYC allows instructors to know how students perceive the world of the classroom and beyond. Student self-writing reveals vital information that helps instructors do their jobs and makes good use of the limited time

together. My experience of this comes from teaching a fairly wide range of students — those in private institutions as well as the underserved population at my area community college.

Knowing *something* about my students and their personal stories helps me create a safer learning environment for them. Personal essay is one way for my students to self-identify specific barriers to learning. The autobiographical narrative helps identify areas where students want and need help most. Through their self-writing, students can carry on a conversation with me that may include elements, beyond their writing, that impact their learning.

Important information is offered in self-writing. Because I teach in an environment where students routinely drop off the map without warning, sometimes to jail, and sometimes out of a tradition of not knowing how to stay, I need to know what is happening in their lives. Self-writing in this instance becomes a form of temperature taking, gauging when to bring coffee, juice and fresh fruit to class, when to draw alongside, or when to make a phone call. The versatile nature of personal writing can be utilized from the very beginning of the semester.

I might, for instance, ask my students to address personal issues in their daily writing. The following is an example of a list of writing assignments that ask the student to address the specifics of how they are doing. In this case the free-writing exercise has to do with anger, but it could be about any issue of concern:

#### CREATIVE WRITING EXERCISE: HOW ARE YOU DOING? EXPANDING THE STORY

Start with a list. Write down the things that have made you angry in the past week — or past month, if your week has been mild. Take some time and try to remember all of them, from stubbing your toe on a chair leg, to someone's adamant refusal to do what you

asked, to your senator's cowardly vote on a bill you strongly support. Keep a running tally for a few days, if necessary. Pick one item from your list and free write about it, telling in a rush of words (don't sweat the punctuation or the style at this stage) how you felt and why you felt that way. Can you fashion this into a more considered essay or poem?

1.) Place the items from your list above into categories, such as "home," "school," "family," "friends," "the news," "social injustice" or whatever categories are appropriate for you. Then add to each list by moving farther back in time — a month, even a year. Write down what you can remember, then pick a category and look for patterns. Is there something that angers you on a regular basis?

2.) Write about your relationship with anger. Are you an angry person? Do you hold your anger in or let it out? Do you let it out in what could be considered appropriate ways? Do you express anger at the true sources, or do you find other people and things at which to vent? Road rage, for example, is usually the result of anger at something else. The guy who cuts us off in traffic is simply an easy target.

3.) Choose someone you know who handles anger well and describe how she does it. If you tend to hold in your anger, you might admire someone who speaks her mind. If you tend to unleash your anger too quickly, you might admire some who exercises more self-control. Either way, write about why you wish you could handle your anger as this other person does.

4.) If you could embody your anger with an animal, what one would be the most appropriate. Tiger? Vulture? Write about why you chose that animal.

5.) Write a letter to someone at whom you are angry or once felt anger. Really blast him or her. Then write a letter to that same person in a calmer tone, explaining how you feel or felt. This letter can be effective if you didn't show your anger at the time.

6.) Write a letter to someone who is or was angry with you. Apologize, if necessary, or explain your reasons for doing whatever made him/her angry.

7.) Psychologists tell us that fear lies beneath anger. Think about how this theory applies to you or, if you're writing a story, to your characters. In a free-write, try to dig beneath the anger and find what fears might be causing the anger.

8.) Write an essay entitled "On Anger," in which you begin with your own feelings about anger—such as what makes you mad, how you and other people handle anger — and move to some conclusions about the nature of this complicated emotion. Do some research on the subject of anger. (Chapman)

Another task for the personal essay in its most elementary form, which also marks the very beginning of a class time together, is the diagnostic writing sample. Here, students may not self-identify the areas of writing where they struggle most, but surely will demonstrate them. The autobiographical narrative in each case is a *place to begin* the writing process.

#### THE CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD WRITING

At first glance, a definition of 'good writing' seems fairly simple. Some contend that good writers are aware of their beliefs, feelings, thoughts and ideas, and are able to use writing to articulate them. I'd like to suggest that good writers do not always know at the outset what they think until they have gone through the process of writing it out. Figuring out what one thinks in connection to a larger topic, using first person narrative in a series of first steps is useful for many. Elbow's organic approach to writing has to do with the internal connections of the writer that first serves the self and then acts to communicate with others.

Only after the novice writer makes an internal connection, which I contend is most efficiently arrived at through first person, are they able to connect their writing to the external.

Good writers investigate their own ideas through self-writing. They examine the implications of these ideas and then they express them outwardly. I contend that only after self-writing happens, can the writing be moved to include externals such as audience awareness. This external connection takes place as a later step in the writing process. A last step, also an autobiographical form, is the reflection on the writing process and the greater articulation of what the student *means* when they write.

A reverse example comes from one of my first classroom experiences as a teacher when I followed a rather rigorous approach to writing out of fear of deviating from the status quo. One of my FYC students made an unintentional argument in his perfectly constructed paper. In his paper, he suggested that the safety of the greater population necessitated the suspension of the U.S. Constitution. When I pointed this out, he had not even been aware of its presence in his paper. He was horrified at the implication of his assertion. He went back to work on the paper to correct his unintentional argument.

I speculate here that if I had first assigned a free-writing step in the assignment, one in which the student had been allowed to first communicate with himself and then to write in communication with others, he might not have wandered so far afield. I contend that the use of first-person at the outset would have allowed him to be clearer about what he wanted to say.

It is also my job to engage my students in critical conversations with complex readings and to ask them to respond in writing as the means to examine their knowledge and understanding of the work. However, the added step of self-writing is useful in encoding



information more deeply. Thus, when given opportunities to write their responses in first person to the work of others, students strengthen their connection with the text as they also learn to articulate and develop their own ideas. When it comes to their own writing, student voices should always be part of the conversation.

It is safe to say that as students move beyond FYC, they need to be increasingly aware of the implications of their views. Students develop a greater awareness of the greater terrain when their views are connected with the views of others: reading and writing as extended forms of listening and speaking. Thus, I would add to the list of characteristics of good writers by saying that students who write first person responses to complex material become more aware of themselves and their ideas, are more able to articulate what they think, and more able to be reflective not only about their writing process, but also about their thinking process. I contend that good writers learn which ideas and details to foreground and which ones to background as they consider the importance of subtext. Good writers engage in the messiness of the writing process to get at these various layers of meaning. Lastly, good writers also engage in writing that is always in the process of becoming better.

Utilizing self-writing in FYC allows students to arrive at some of these elements of good writing more quickly. Writing in first person creates a connection between writers and their ideas. At least, that is the way it works for me. On the other hand, writing in third person permits students to articulate only the ideas of others, and in rather formulaic ways. When students are allowed to add their own voices to the conversation, they gain a greater sense of their developing views.

Further, when my students measure the depths of the unknown against the known facts of their experiences they feel more reassured. If they are allowed to think independently

and then write about what they think, when I add new tasks — active reading, pre-writing, research, visual elements, technological components, organizational requirements, revising, reflecting and oral presentation — they are more likely to follow me into the deep. The known elements of their own perspective can act to reduce their anxiety about the parts of writing that they have not yet conquered.

I also contend that when students have been forbidden to use “I,” their ability to articulate the problems they have with writing are made worse. If there is no platform for discussing the self, the problems the students struggle with remain unidentified. It simply helps students to include the self as part of the whole. If students are allowed to speak meaningfully about their lives in an environment that acknowledges them, it goes a long way to promote the classroom as a safe space to write.

I will go so far as to say that without permission to write the self, students often do not know how to include what they think. Novice writers who have not been given permission to write in the first person, *as a way to begin*, often fail to understand the connection between themselves and the topic at hand. It is as if they are describing life on Mars, a place they have never seen or hope to experience, when in fact, the topic may be as familiar as the dangers of secondhand smoke. The student simply shuts down and writes as if she knows nothing of the topic or its considerations. The writing exhibits symptoms rooted in anxiety and fear of failure as the student blindly follows a checklist that asks nothing of their personal understanding.

This disconnect from the topic can be easily remedied by providing a first step that engages students in self-writing. First person writing helps them to begin to write the topic. It makes a clear difference in their writing and understanding if they have been allowed to inhabit the work and to make it their own. Once they personalize the content and discover

through writing its initial meaning for them, they often have less trouble following the road map that includes the minutiae of form and the checklist of research, outline and thesis statements. I contend that autobiographical essay is simply a matter of putting first things first.

As a Writing Center tutor, it has also been my experience that students usually cannot explain the problems they have with writing because they do not know how. I often point to patterns of mistakes and ask students, “What do *you* think is the biggest issue here?” In our conversations, because I am not the authority, they can relax and begin to describe with great clarity how they perceive the problem. As they begin writing again, I simply repeat their story back to them as they scribble furiously. I wonder when they stopped listening to their own voices.

Thus, creative writing in FYC, specifically autobiographical narrative, is a way for novice writers to begin. In its more straightforward form, the personal essay helps writers grab hold of a topic and dig in. As students move beyond FYC, they will need to take on new and sophisticated modes of articulation. In upper level classes, the use of the autobiographical essay allows students to represent themselves in the larger conversation. I contend that we must offer our students permission to articulate their own ideas and thoughts in first person narrative, especially as they begin the writing process. There is benefit to the personal “I” of the student engaged in conversation with complex ideas, expressed in writing.

In Chapter Three, I will introduce and explore uses of digital media in creatively constructed projects as a means to expand and deepen critical and creative thinking in writing and multimodal presentation. I will continue to advocate for the use of the autobiographical narrative as students engage with greater complexities and ambiguities.

Finally, I also contend that when students connect internally with their own ideas as a way to process new material they also learn how to articulate both their ideas and the ideas of the text. It follows then that the students will see with new eyes.

Seeing comes before words ... It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words.”

—John Berger; *Ways of Seeing*

## CHAPTER THREE

Complex ideas, intertwined with the personal voice of autobiographical narrative, take on interesting new life as they become more visually, spatially and outwardly directed. Gunther Kress and Theo Leeuwen in *Reading Images* discuss socially and culturally shaped multimodal resources that use imagery, writing, layout, speech and video as the means to address important ideas (35). According to Kress, multimodal learning uses more than just images. It also makes use of animated movement, writing, speech, gesture, or gaze. Hypertext, an element of online documents, is embedded as links to multiple media pages, videos and imagery, which ultimately uses "... visual material [that] either drive[s] or support[s]" the document (Miller and Paola 129). Hypertext, embedded with hyperlinks, can be accessed either by clicking or hovering over areas of text, doors leading to rooms, leading to still other rooms, and so on, *ad infinitum*; this is the proverbial online rabbit research trail.

The cultural implications of hypertext are contained within its coded language, which act similarly to lead readers into a succession of rooms of interconnected but a non-linear organization of ideas. Coded language within a body of text, or imagery may convey messages about sexuality, gender, racial difference and class distinction, to name just a few. Students who spend hour-upon-hour cruising the Internet have already been down thousands of these rabbit holes. This is where we ought to begin to discuss cultural awareness, and use the tools of the Internet to do so. Creative projects that include evidence of intersectionality embedded within technology can increase cultural awareness of these coded messages. Understanding such messages in the both the visual and the written becomes an important element in deciding who makes meaning and how.

Intersectionality refers to the overlapping nature of systems of oppression. As I teach my students to deconstruct, for instance, music videos, video games, advertisements

and political speeches, the students become more aware of systems at work to shape and define how they view the other and themselves. For my purposes here, I use intersectionality in its traditional theoretical sense to mean the study of systems of oppression, discrimination, or disadvantage and how they interact with one another in the categorizations of race, class and gender. One example of this, *We Are Angry*, a production of Digital Fables, is a multimedia website using autobiographical narrative and utilizing a form of multimodal storytelling, which they fittingly refer to as: “transmedia/transliteracy/new media/hypertext narrative fusions of video, art and games, ... creating 360 degree digital fiction” writing, but of course it is not fictive (Pickett).

When students investigate images from social media using a critical lens to do so, they begin to understand the power of media to re-present and cast shade on the ways that we perceive ourselves and perceive others. Students are asked to respond in first person to the contention that media fundamentally changes how they understand the culture and themselves in it. I need only point to the billions of dollars spent on advertising that uses ultra-thin, sexualized, exoticized, eroticized, racially coded, pubescent children to sell a host of products. Madison Avenue has little doubt of the power of visual media to shape behavior. The inverse is also true. Students visit multiple sites without ever questioning the invisible third world technical sweatshops that produce much of the information they consume. Nor do they question how many thousands of invisible workers make far less than they need to survive.

My students, typical of this generation, are immersed in social media and are quite willing to engage in projects that include technology. By offering them critical strategies as a means to address their immersion, and by merging creative methods, such as autobiographical narrative, with multimodal hybridity, the students will engage in close

observation and attention to detail, both of which will enhance their critical thinking about what images and words ultimately *mean*. They will question who produces the information that they so easily consume, digest and regurgitate. Their awareness of intersectionalities will come through multiple readings, class discussions and their own exploration of online media. These serve to develop a greater understanding of the power of social media to shape their understanding of practically everything.

Further, the use of social media as a teaching tool improves student engagement because students, already visual beings and born into a technological era, are closely attuned to the messages and modes of expression within technology. Digital media creates space for “creative/visual/spatial/auditory” elements, and opportunities for collaborative learning (Pickett). Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola address the generational divide in this issue of technology:

For those of us born in the dark ages before 1970, writing was most often conceived of as a private, solitary activity. ... But in the last decade, we have seen a grand shift in that perception: with the prevalence of social media, certain kinds of writing are becoming a public act, with more writing coming across our desktops — literal and virtual — than ever before. (134)

A major benefit to teaching FYC in computer labs is that the technology in the room offers opportunities to students to perform equally. Many of my poorer students do not have access to technology outside of school. Holding class in a computer lab levels the playing field. Greater access to technology facilitates the students’ full participation and thus aides their retention in programs. Further, access to technology and the time to use it keeps many students from dropping off the radar because they cannot keep up. Finally, the ability



to use various forms of technology prepares students for the workplace. The critical thinking component makes them more reflective about their use of the medium and thus, better citizens.

Most of my students cannot imagine their lives without phones. Even my homeless students have cell phones. It is their symbol of normalcy and belonging. In “Creativity as Capital in the Literacy Classroom,” Christopher S. Walsh addresses the reality of a generation born into a digital age. He writes that “... it became clear that my curriculum did not take into account the multimodality of students’ out-of-school digital literacy practices or their proficiency” (Walsh 79). Multimodal projects are familiar to this generation of students. They are also comfortable with the demands of technology in a way that those of us born into the mid-twentieth century never will be.

Though students are well versed in technology, they are not always visually literate. Students may need help in connecting the meanings of images to the text in meaningful ways. The following writing exercises enhance visual literacy:

1. Use imagery regularly in assignments: post a photograph stripped of its caption and context. Ask students what they see in the picture. This opens up discussion of who makes meaning of the text: the author/painter/photographer, the reader/viewer, or the text/image. These are complexities with which students must grapple when coming into contact with visual arguments.

2. Ask open-ended questions: At the heart of visual thinking activities are three deceptively simple, open-ended questions. The goal is to help students notice details and make observations without leading them toward any conclusion or right answer.

What’s going on in this picture?

What do you see that makes you say that?

What more can you find?

3. Help students enter the conversation and build on one another's observations, which helps them to evaluate and link their ideas collaboratively.

4. Adapt the questions to suit a broad range of subjects. The practice of finding details to defend interpretations improves students' academic skills, even in the sciences. In fact, the three simple questions at the heart of visual thinking strategies can be adapted for close reading of any text, whether in an English classroom, a science classroom, or the visual text:

- What do you notice going on in this chapter, diagram and political cartoon? (Gonchar)
- What details do you see that make you say that? What evidence supports your observations?
- What more can you find in the text?

5. Expand student knowledge of the world: students enjoy creative activities, which helps expand their knowledge of and curiosity about the world, in addition to making them more visually literate. Students use creative means to make connections between a close observation of images, what they're hearing in class discussions and material they're reading in class. They even pull other ideas from other classes.

6. Use imagery to foster conversation in adult education classes, especially E.S.L. Images can be a way to introduce new vocabulary words. Students can use their personal knowledge of the world to figure out what is happening in the photos while building ability to explain.

7. Use imagery to foster conversation in adult education classes, especially E.S.L. Images can be a way to introduce new vocabulary words. Students can use their personal knowledge of the world to figure out what is happening in the photos as students increase their ability to explain.

8. Use imagery to introduce new ideas: practicing visual thinking strategies is useful in gaining a window into other places, times or perspectives. This is useful in history, sociology and psychology classrooms. Use multiple approaches to help students practice visual thinking, to be better readers of the visual text. (Gonchar)

Perhaps it is time to admit that instructors are often the ones who lag behind their students in understanding how technology operates or how creativity looks to the students. It behooves us, I think, to gain some traction in this area as we also instruct students in critical thinking. Because most of our students were born into this digital age, as instructors we must create meaningful spaces that fuse areas of technology with our specific disciplines, using critical strategies to make the exercises ethical and challenging. If technology is a second language for us, we too become explorers, learning as much from our students as they learn from us.

Creative fusing makes use of diverse and sometimes disparate ideas, creating inventive uses for autobiographical narrative and technology in the genre specific classroom. Walsh writes, "Moving beyond print based representations ... [multimodal] assignments and projects ... require students to integrate and orchestrate images, written text, sound, music, animation and video in their designs" (Walsh 79). Technology is their primary means of communicating and is familiar to our students, and thus is exceedingly meaningful to them. It behooves us to familiarize ourselves with these trends, and where applicable, to integrate

them into our repertoire of teaching tools. Walsh “position[s] students as multimodal designers who ... use their creativity resourcefully to exploit the semiotic potentials of modes other than print” (Walsh 79). In other words, our students are already decoding the language of technology. We need to bring the lenses of theoretical engagement to the conversation we’re having with them, employ these lenses on the new form, and allow students to critically examine and deconstruct what is nevertheless already there.

David Foster Wallace, in his speech, “This is Water,” offers the perfect analogy of the proverbial fish in water to stand in for contemporary students immersed in contemporary media. His description is a fitting way to introduce the argument that the culture is inundated by digital media and that we are often inured to its shaping:

Two young fish [were] swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, ‘Morning, boys, how's the water?’ And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, ‘What the hell is water?’ (Wallace)

#### HYBRIDITY: MELDING AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE & MULTIMODALITY

The visual elements in social media are easily used in multimodal projects, and most specifically the visual representation of race, class, gender, or orientation, as well as a host of other culturally constructed ideas. However, using pop culture in the classroom is only one example. There are many more ways to use multimedia in FYC. For instance, students routinely use original photography or videos taken with their own smartphones. They also use multiple online apps to add audio or visual elements, which can be downloaded from

copyright free sites. I have listed several of those links in the appendix. Students routinely create films using imagery or animation and their own voices in narration.

Multimodal learning relies heavily on visual and auditory elements embedded in the text, as well as the spoken, eye contact and gesture as the means to make meaning. Students use a variety of elements, including the written as the means to reflect on and demonstrate complex ideas. Technology “embedded in the literary work ... incorporates visual elements such as photos, artwork, and streaming videos,” links or hypertext, which ignites student interest, investment and engagement in their learning (Miller and Paola 129). This is an example of hybridity, which I will investigate later in the chapter.

#### PRAGMATIC CREATIVITY & THE REFLECTIVE PROCESS

I am not suggesting that the required eight, ten, or twelve-page paper should go away. Rather, I do suggest that the paper is merely the tip of the communication iceberg. Creatively constructed projects integrate multiple elements, demonstrated before the classroom as evidences of critical thinking and engagement with the material. Students present their interpretations of information, creating new and original spaces by using their own carefully chosen elements, which hold autobiographical traces. Kristine Fleckenstein, in “Words Made Flesh,” suggests that we seek to develop polymorphic literacy in our students — reading and writing — that draws on both “verbal and nonverbal ways of shaping meaning” (613). When students demonstrate this awareness, I know they are making their own statements in response to and in dialogue with the material assigned.

Student ability to critically navigate hypertextuality, both as technological doors leading to other rooms and as culturally constructed codes inherent in all writing, is an important turning point in their understanding. Students use hypertextuality and multimedia

presentation purposefully and demonstrate that learning has taken place. In other words, our students learn to look for the subtext inherent in both imagery and words. Though it is often difficult for our students to explain why they know what they know using only the written forms imposed on them, multimodal hypertextuality opens doors to multiple forms of expression in which student perspective and ideas are demonstrated through various means.

Multimodal presentations are pedagogically sound in that they accompany the written, which reveal how the ideas of students are connected to a text and act as the visual interpretation of a particular idea. In my FYC, the multimodal project contains several interconnected writing assignments, a patchwork quilt so to speak. Students plan, investigate, propose and present their ideas to the class all along the way. The students field a series of question and answers in front of the class to explain, in as much detail as they can, what their projects will entail. The research team is tasked with grilling its members about various points and with offering sound suggestions for moving forward. The solitary paper read, only by the professor, is not a helpful model here.

Rather, students immerse themselves in active group participation in their in-class reading, researching and discussion of the material. In these projects, students write and revise based on group peer edits. It is in the reflection that the solitary voice of the student speaks about the project, articulating its key features as a follow up to what has already been demonstrated to the entire class. Well-designed multimodal projects with audio, visual, and spatial elements move students above and beyond the single academic paper, even as students are engaged fully in the writing process all along the way.

Multimodal projects with creative elements do not neglect the elements of good writing. In fact the results of such projects can be equated to the five-paragraph essay squared. All along the way the novice writer must attend to summary, response and analysis,

mechanics and punctuation, proper citation and the like. The written portion of such projects cover myriad tasks: autobiographical narrative, project proposal, interview essay, artifact analysis essay, research paper, annotated bibliography, blog postings and reflective pieces. The real complexities are the ideas articulated and demonstrated in well-planned, well-executed presentations. Admittedly, creative projects require more out-of-class time to produce and more in-class time to present. However, the benefits to student understanding outweigh the time expended. It has been my experience that students willingly invest time in their projects.

#### PRAGMATIC CREATIVITY & TECHNOLOGY

The following examples are of multimodal projects, creative interpretations based in technology. First, I'm the Graduate Assistant in a creative nonfiction class where the students are in the midst of presenting digital stories, each going five-to-seven minutes. The works are original both in content and in presentation. The students are not only deeply invested in their own work but also in the work of their classmates. Students actively engage in critique, a form of collaboration, offering one another suggestions for improving the end product. Students spend hours longer than might be expected engaged in the various stages of this project, and further, are more willing to spend even more hours watching and discussing with avid admiration the work of their fellow classmates. The engagement and participation is worthy of note by those outside the creative writing domain.

A second example comes from my own student experience producing digital stories and poems, developed during my time at EIU. My graduate level poetry class required the students to create cine-poems, melding cinematic elements, visual elements, music and voice-over to create a completely new expression of an original poem. For the assignment, I

changed a poem that I had written, a Tanka poem — an ancient form of extended haiku — entitled “Pomegranates in Winter,” into a video length form known as a cine-poem. In its reinterpretation, the poem’s form changed drastically. The haiku, as every fifth grader knows, is a concise written form containing a controlled syllable count. The Tanka, a received form from ancient China, predates haiku. By putting the poem into cinematic form I changed its nature on a fundamental level.

For the project, I used photographic stills of snow and videoed sequences of snow falling in a night sky. The words of the poem drifted down like the snow with the music of Vivaldi’s “Winter,” in the background, my own voice speaking the lyric lines of the poem. Because the poem is my own, its content is autobiographical in nature. The haiku morphed into a more modern form when it became visually mobile in a cine-poem. My experience with both the poetic form and the use of digital storytelling was expansive to say the least.

A third example comes from my first semester at EIU. I enrolled in a literary theory class addressing the theoretical issues underlying gender identity through our investigation of a “Queer” text, in both the written and the cinematic. Our final project was to create a movie that would investigate LGBT politics, on the forefront because of the Marriage Equality Act. For my cinematic project, I created a documentary about my friends’ same-gendered wedding, which then became about a transgendered relationship as Hannah became Jonah through the use of hormone therapy. I also filmed an interview with a medical professional in the Champaign-Urbana area who was familiar with hormone therapy. The couple graciously shared their wedding photos and the story about their married life in Seattle.

My vision for the film was to give the images a timeless look, as if the photos were ages old, so often the case with wedding photos, and a reason why they fascinate me as



cultural artifacts. To get this effect, I employed a sepia tone to the piece, set the work to the music of the Beatles, “The Long and Winding Road,” and various other sound effects provided by Apple iMovie ®. The movie became a gift to my friends. I’m pleased to report that they loved my version of their story.

Putting complex theoretical ideas into visual, cinematic forms, using digital technologies and the glut of information on the Internet, asks students to re-envision what they are reading and processing cognitively. The visual elements of their online rabbit trails, their *Through the Looking Glass* experiences will be organized and represented by the lenses of the theoretical ideas we have introduced in the classroom. The reflective written pieces act to explain what they understood, what elements they introduced into their projects, and what the connections are with the material assigned. I contend that the visual symbols they use to explain, explore and connect with complex ideas will continue unlock complexities far down the road.

As an aside, more and more online journals have begun to call for digital stories, cine-poems, and creatively constructed projects that utilize imagery with the spoken word. These digital stories are considered a separate genre from fiction, creative nonfiction or poetry, even as they also use the elements of each. Technology and multimodality changes the nature of the work. I have placed several links to sites that receive digital storytelling submissions within the appendix. Many more are easily found online.

#### HYBRID FORMS: CREATIVE WRITING & TECHNOLOGY

Individual student responses in these projects are as creative as they are original, and often deeply profound. Well-constructed multimodal projects allow students to demonstrate

their own particular understanding of the material. In both the written and the creative elements the students strengthen and extend the connections between ideas.

Web-based assignments are easily accomplished in computer lab classrooms, which better serve this generation of students. Presentation addresses complex ideas through visual and spatial means, moving projects “away from page-bound thinking” (Miller and Paola 129). Awakening and fostering a creative spirit increases student interest in the topic. This translates into a greater commitment to their work.

What I have discovered is that students who excel in one aspect of a project may struggle with other parts. This struggle holds merit; areas of challenge are opportunities for growth. Some students are masters of the presentation, others lead well in small group settings, still others grasp big ideas quickly in brainstorming, and finally, some are technological gurus. Helping students arrive at proficiency in multiple areas includes asking them to also engage with challenging texts, to organize their thoughts in writing and to articulate complex ideas more clearly. There is great value inherent in multilayered writing projects and the challenges they present.

Students take on the lion’s portion of the work for these projects. Once I plan the course and set the class into motion, I remain in the background, offering help only where help is needed, conferencing with students one-to-one, advising and encouraging. I offer mini-lectures on the writing process and answer their questions about technology. Ample checkpoints and opportunities for revision are embedded throughout. The students assess and reassess their writing as they engage critically with the topic. Equally important, because they collaborate with their classmates throughout the process, they never need to imagine the hypothetical reader.

For the reasons stated earlier, this kind of project must take place in a computer lab because it is adequately equipped with audio and video editing technology. Graeme Harper and Jeri Kroll, in *Creative Writing: Practice, Research and Pedagogy*, write that, “The goal [of multimodal projects] is to change students’ relationships to language, to make language into a material to be used . . .” similar to the ways imagery and auditory elements are used (23). Students integrate the written with the spatial, the private with the public and the creative with the academic, shaped, formed and comprehended in digital mediums.

There are those who have developed visual thinking strategies that work with the focus of this thesis, and which include visual elements that can be used in multimodal projects. Dr. Abigail Housen, of Harvard's Graduate School of Education, connects critical thinking, autobiographical narrative and multimodal projects as the focus of her work, *Visual Thinking Strategies*. Housen suggests that class discussions surrounding imagery, whether paintings or photography, contains measurable stages of thinking and narrating. Her research demonstrates that students move toward clarity of thought in knowable stages, each with its own particular, idiosyncratic way of making sense (Housen).

Writing about imagery contains autobiographical elements that help students grapple with visual literacy. Their introduction to visual elements begins as stream-of consciousness monologue. Out of that monologue emerges aesthetic considerations and vocabulary that, Housen suggests, encourages growth in both critical and creative thinking. Further, her findings are consistent over a wide range of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds (Housen)

The first stage of thinking is ‘accountive,’ where the viewer uses storytelling, the senses, memories and personal associations to connect with the imagery. Here, responses are subjective and they hold autobiographical elements. The second stage is ‘constructive.’

Students broaden their framework and their vocabulary while continuing to use their perceptions, knowledge of the natural world, and the values of their social, moral and conventional rules (Housen). This too is an autobiographical stage spoken and written in the first person (Housen). This stage bridges the personal perspective with the universal or collective.

The third stage Housen refers to as ‘classifying.’ This stage is more analytical of the historical, categorical elements within the works of art or images. Students decode using facts, much of which will come from their assigned readings (Housen). The fourth stage is ‘interpretive.’ Students explore an image for greater meaning and for its visual and artistic elements — including line, shape and color, or perhaps, the photographic method employed to achieve an effect (Housen). The fifth stage is ‘re-creative.’ Students view and reflect. The image is familiar. This familiarity creates a sense of ownership, which, in turn, encourages greater investment. Further investigation of the visual work allows students to more fully explore its time, historical or social implications and schools of thought from which the work emerged (Housen).

She writes that each new encounter with an image presents an opportunity for comparisons and insights. This is an example of creative and critical revision of thought. The elements of personal reflection then combine with the larger concerns of the work. The result is a deeper encoding of complex ideas through the visual (Housen). Imagery engages students in both critical and creative thinking by allowing investigation, categorization, discussion, the written and the reflective — each a complex cognitive move.

Photography, especially in the depiction of race, class, gender or orientation, conveys an argument. Informed viewers are able to interpret and respond to the arguments by employing various lenses. Further, when students are introduced to methods of “reading”

the messages embedded in imagery, and they begin to address its power to mean, they also begin to make more purposeful judgments about their viewing. Reflective essay asks students to address these viewing experiences — ideas, thoughts and connotations of the visual — in written form.

Preparing presentations bring students into contact with these multiple mediums, all of which help them more deeply understand their topic as they also prepare to speak about their findings to the class. Their paper is no longer an isolated artifact, an end unto itself. Nor is the technological component the whole of the thing. Rather each operates as individual parts of the consolidated whole. Each step demands the students' full attention and each step in the process moves them toward greater mastery in critical and creative thinking, in writing, visual literacy and in oral presentation. Moreover, my experience with such projects is that they also work to build empathy in the students as they become immersed in a project that makes them more aware of the plight of those less fortunate than themselves.

The benefits of using creative elements, especially autobiographical narrative, in media-enhanced projects are several. Such hybrid, multi-layered methods help students decode the never-ending visual messages in media. As a result, students gain a greater handle on the embedded complexities everywhere online. Further, the transition of the written into visually reproduced forms, made possible by technological modes of representation, holds a complex interaction of elements that stretches learning far beyond words written on paper

“Above all else: in God’s name, don’t think of it as Art”

— James Agee; *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

“This is why the camera seems to me, next to unassisted and weaponless consciousness, the central instrument of our time; and is why in turn I feel such rage at its misuse: which has spread so nearly universal a corruption of sight that I know of less than a dozen alive whose eyes I can trust even so much as my own”

— James Agee; *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

## THE PROCESS

In my FYC class, themed ‘Art & Culture,’ my students connected personal narrative, artifacts, collaboration and digital representation into hybrid projects that focused on the topic of poverty and the power of media to shape our views. I use the hybrid assignment because students are instantly drawn in as I explain our final presentation on that first day of class, affectionately referred to as Saint Syllabus Day.

Thomas Larson writes in “The Hybrid Narrative” that one of “... the most intriguing developments in nonfiction writing, is the growth of the hybrid narrative.” In hybrid or mosaic pieces, the writer utilizes two and often more disparate components: imagery and technology, fictive and nonfictive elements, writing and interactivity. For instance, a narrative can be created and then hybridized with elements that are not at all *like* the narrative. These diverse pieces may include imagery, music, video clips, artifacts and autobiographical narrative, all of which dialogue with the text in new ways. The results often create a new space between the elements. Anne Carson’s *Nox* is an example of a hybrid form. Annie Dillard’s work, *For the Time Being* is another example.

Here, writers mix fact and fiction, as in fictocriticism; poetry can be mixed with art in a form called ekphrasis; memoir is braided with history and biography with memoir. The hybrid is also referred to as nonlinear narrative, composite, quilt, pastiche, montage, collage, mosaic, and bricolage. These forms blur one genre with another in a structure that is braided, threaded, woven, broken, fragmented, or segmented.

In my FYC, I taught a hybrid form of the narrative in a series of individual assignments that covered the entire term. The individual pieces ultimately were melded together to create a composite in response to the topic of media representations of poverty.

To begin our investigation the students looked at images taken before, during and after the Great Depression. Students also investigated more contemporary media representations of class distinctions, as well as media depiction of race and gender. My reason for starting with historic images was to set the groundwork for discovering the power of imagery to shape how we perceive class, and conversely how we perceive our present class culture.

Over the course of ten weeks, the students are immersed in a sequence of readings, discussions, and images surrounding this topic, all of which address the broader question of who makes meaning. Students are also asked to consider the various ways that images convey meaning and for what purposes. My rationale is this: If Bartholomae's argument against autobiographical narrative is that it amounts to so much navel gazing then connecting self-writing with the topic of poverty, for instance, and using images and words that act to re-shape student ideas of the powerlessness of the poor, the work becomes not only be about the student's perspective, but also about the contemporary cultural landscape in which they live. Thus, I integrate the autobiographical narrative into my FYC, informed by the topic of poverty.

Through their exploration of the written and the visual, students began to understand the rhetorical nature of words and imagery to shape how we read the past and know the present, the self and others. When assessing imagery, for instance, students consider such variables as camera angle and framing as a means to shape a message. They also consider how captions instruct the viewer in their read of the image. Through the use of technology, students understand how much the image is manipulated to appear to *mean*, as they also become more aware of this same rhetorical truth inherent in all images as constructions of particular points-of-view.



In their first examination of the shaping power of imagery, students looked at an essay about Civil War daguerreotypes taken by Mathew Brady, often referred to as the father of photojournalism. From their reading in *The Shape of Reason*, by John T. Gage, the students begin to understand that Brady manipulated the truth in several ways: by posing dead bodies on the battlefield, by replacing flags or weapons in the hands of the dead, and by placing himself in the picture, sometimes in uniform. Moreover, Brady often passed off photographs taken by others as his own. Students begin to understand that photography, from its earliest inception, can be manipulated for propagandistic ends.

## II

Next, my students investigate the work of Jacob Riis, “How the Other Half Lives.” Riis was a photojournalist who took pictures of tenement slums in N. Y. City in the early 20th century (Bartholomae and Petrosky 336). At the time, photojournalism was connected with police surveillance. So the story goes, Riis accompanied the police on a raid into the slums. His job was to take pictures of those arrested (336). In the process, the flash powder nearly burned the tenement to the ground, none of which is reflected in his photograph. This near disaster had the impact of awakening Riis to the power of those behind the lens of the camera to skew the truth (336). Riis’s reflection on his power to disrupt and nearly kill cause the students to address specific examples of unethical manipulation of imagery to *mean* — especially weighty in controlling how the public perceives the objectified other.

The first writing assignment is a two-page paper that allows self-writing connected to the reading that explores their individual experiences with poverty. Some students write their family stories dating back to the Great Depression. Others write what they have seen from their car windows of the homeless next to freeway ramps holding cardboard signs, their

sense that the poor are not really poor but lazy. They use terms such as mentally ill, disreputable, liars, thieves and panhandlers.

Next, we read an essay by Lars Eighner entitled, “On Dumpster Diving,” which is a how-to guide for the homeless. Eighner’s essay will also inform our discussion of poverty and survival. Eighner’s autobiographical narrative essay represents the homeless speaking about being homeless. This is not a perspective students would normally consider. After the students read the essay, we engage in a free-write to get their thoughts ready for the next writing assignment.

The following are free-writing and selected writing exercises for journaling. These can be used daily, or in response to a specific reading. I prefer it that my students engage in this activity on a daily basis. Asking students to write informally about themselves is one way I’ve approached this. For instance, I’ve used an “Interest Inventory,” which includes several pages of questions. Students can choose any five from the list.

Todd Arnold suggests that instructors let their students know early on how informal writing assignments will factor into their grades. He writes, “Beware that ‘ungraded’ can translate as ‘not worth my time.’” Part of the students’ participation grade is factored into these daily journal entries. Arnold suggests that the students should be able to identify their audience. The following are six tips for writing:

- A short reflective writing assignment at the end of a lecture can help students integrate and process the material you’ve just presented to them. This helps students become more invested in the topic.
- If you use small-group activities, consider prefacing them with an informal writing activity to set the stage for their interaction. Students

will have a minute to clarify their thinking and will be more likely to open up in discussion.

- If you use essay exams, consider having a mock essay question a couple weeks before your midterm or final. Even if you can't commit to evaluating their responses, students will benefit for having seen a "typical exam question."
- You can get more elaborate, asking multiple or complex questions with up to 10 minutes of writing time, but be sure to focus ample class time to your follow up. Try to integrate students' written responses into this summary.
- Free-writes about big projects that are coming due can help focus students' attention on looming deadlines and can help prevent plagiarism.
- The quality of your free-writing exercises will parallel the quality of your questions. Try to ask good, clear questions. But don't be afraid to fail once in a while too. (Arnold)

While the ideas of intersectionality are important, they aren't the whole of a FYC class. It is also our job to teach our students how to write academically acceptable papers. We address such issues as thesis, organization, basic forms of the essay such as summary and response. That said, the autobiographical elements within student essays yield interesting information beyond their connection to greater theoretical ideas.

For instance, the students who do not speak aloud in class are often quite candid in their writing. One student discusses how her family is barely hanging onto their house, how

her father has been unemployed and her mother now supports the family. Another student admits his homelessness and writes that he's been couch surfing for months because his parents have kicked him out. He also writes that he has had nothing to eat that day. Another student admits in writing that if it weren't for student loans paying the bills, she wouldn't have a place to live or food to eat.

At least once each semester, I've made it a point to ask my students the simple question: how are you doing? I simply want to know. Students who have not come near my office will tell me in writing how overwhelmed they sometimes feel. Important information is yielded in self-writing and as a teacher, I need to know it.

### III

Next, I introduce images by Walker Evans from "American Photographs," which make up the entire first chapter of a work entitled, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, by James Agee. There are approximately sixty-seven pages of images, three families, all tenant farmers in Alabama during the Great Depression. Evans affixes no captions whatsoever to the images. We have to guess what these images mean.

Students are asked to work collaboratively to answer questions about the people in the pictures based on their placement within the picture frame, the configuration of bodies in a group, the organization of the pictures within the book, the sections broken by blank pages and to guess who these people might be. In other words, students are asked to make inferences about images without text, to answer questions of who makes meaning, and whether they think captions change how images are read. We discuss our views in small groups and then as a class.

The students offer a variety of responses to the images. Some are drawn to the pictures of children, while others are bored with pictures that don't reflect their cultural markers. Each student is asked to choose three of the pictures for a three-page summary and response paper. The images are to be embedded into the text. Students quickly find ways of making this happen. The pictures are amply represented online.

Up to this point, the students know very few facts about who or what they're seeing, only the author's name and the title of the work. What information they have has been gleaned through small group discussion. My students are given permission to investigate further by using on-line resources, or simply by reading ahead in the book, *Ways of Reading Words and Images* by David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky. I am particularly fond of this text despite my squabble with Bartholomae. The assignment also allows for the autobiographical narrative — individual responses and family stories mingled with the analysis and depiction of Evans's images.

#### IV

Next, the students read "The Preamble" to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, by James Agee. In this brief treatise, the author writes the following:

It seems to me curious, not to say obscene and thoroughly terrifying, that it could occur to an association of human beings drawn together ... for profit into a company, an organ of journalism, to pry intimately into the lives of an undefended and appallingly damaged group of human beings ... for the purpose of parading the nakedness, disadvantage and humiliation of these lives before another group of human beings. (96)

When I assign the reading for homework, I warn my students that the piece is a difficult read. Most of them return to class confused and irate. They have grappled with this essay and have found Agee's language difficult to comprehend. This is a complex text and Agee's words are autobiographical in the extreme. He doubles back on himself, he is full of self-doubt one minute and then he is ranting in the next, all the things they have been taught never to do in a paper. My students need help wrestling meaning from this work, grappling with its complexities. We begin decoding by reading the work aloud in class, stopping along the way to unpack his ideas, drawing attention to his use of language, and opening a few of the doors in the hypertext embedded everywhere throughout this essay.

The students are asked to enter as many of Agee's rooms as they can in order to gain full appreciation of his meanings. They look up words, listen to the music, investigate various references and quotes, put the work on a timeline with a social context, and take notes as they go. When we read the work together the students understand more of the words and Agee's meanings. The poet in me wants them to hear the outrage and beauty in what he writes. They still think he's crazy, but they're intrigued by his ideas.

The students will address the difficult language in "The Preamble" in their next writing assignment. They will summarize and analyze this essay, and expand on their discussion of Evan's images, now using Agee's language to address the pictures. In this hybridized assignment, the students find that the images and the text do not easily align. They learn that Agee would have preferred to work without using words, and that throughout the project he felt the inadequacy of his words to address the problem of human suffering. Agee writes:

If I could do it, I'd do no writing here at all. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement. Booksellers would consider it quite a novelty; critics would murmur, yes, but is it art; and I could trust a majority of you to use it as you would a parlor game. (Bartholomae and Petrosky 99-100)

This assignment could easily be morphed to include both Agee's words and other images than Evans's. As an assignment, that too would yield interesting results. Because technology offers easy access to images that are sexualized, racialized or stratified by wealth and class, and because college students are continually immersed in technology and popular culture, it seems a valid mission to offer them alternative ways to view what they see and read. Our exploration of poverty places an uncomfortable lens over imagery as a means to enhance their critical thinking about those who are caught in the crosshairs of the camera, or conversely made invisible. The students will use technology in their ten-week-long investigation of poverty in order to discuss the power discourse inherent in social media. This seems to me simply a way of fighting fire with fire.

## Appendix

### RESPONDING TO A POSTER: SUMMARY & ANALYSIS

Reset Form	Poster Analysis Worksheet	Print Form
1. What are the main colors used in the poster?	<hr/> <hr/>	
2. What symbols (if any) are used in the poster?	<hr/> <hr/>	
3. If a symbol is used, is it	<hr/>	
a. clear (easy to interpret)?	<hr/>	
b. memorable?	<hr/>	
c. dramatic?	<hr/>	
4. Are the messages in the poster primarily visual, verbal, or both?	Limit response for each question to 2 lines of text	
5. Who do you think is the intended audience for the poster?	<hr/> <hr/>	
6. What does the Government hope the audience will do?	<hr/> <hr/>	
7. What Government purpose(s) is served by the poster?	<hr/> <hr/>	
8. The most effective posters use symbols that are unusual, simple, and direct. Is this an effective poster?	<hr/> <hr/>	

Reset Form

Designed and developed by the  
Education Staff, National Archives and Records Administration,  
Washington, DC 20408

Print Form



RESPONDING TO PHOTOGRAPHY

Reset Form
Photo Analysis Worksheet
Print Form

**Step 1. Observation**

A. Study the photograph for 2 minutes. Form an overall impression of the photograph and then examine individual items. Next, divide the photo into quadrants and study each section to see what new details become visible.

B. Use the chart below to list people, objects, and activities in the photograph.

People	Objects	Activities

**Step 2. Inference** Limit response for each question to 5 lines of text

Based on what you have observed above, list three things you might infer from this photograph.

**Step 3. Questions**

A. What questions does this photograph raise in your mind?

B. Where could you find answers to them?

Reset Form
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Education Staff, National Archives and Records Administration,  
Washington, DC 20408
Print Form

RESPONDING TO MAPS: WRITING THE LANDSCAPE

<a href="#">Reset Form</a>	<b>Map Analysis Worksheet</b>	<a href="#">Print Form</a>
1.	TYPE OF MAP (Check one): <input type="radio"/> Raised Relief map <input type="radio"/> Bird's-eye map <input type="radio"/> Topographic map <input type="radio"/> Artifact map <input type="radio"/> Political map <input type="radio"/> Satellite photograph/mosaic <input type="radio"/> Contour-line map <input type="radio"/> Pictograph <input type="radio"/> Natural resource map <input type="radio"/> Weather map <input type="radio"/> Military map <input type="radio"/> Other	
2.	UNIQUE PHYSICAL QUALITIES OF THE MAP (Check one or more): <input type="checkbox"/> Compass <input type="checkbox"/> Name of mapmaker <input type="checkbox"/> Handwritten <input type="checkbox"/> Title <input type="checkbox"/> Date <input type="checkbox"/> Legend (key) <input type="checkbox"/> Notations <input type="checkbox"/> Other <input type="checkbox"/> Scale	
3.	DATE OF MAP: _____	
4.	CREATOR OF THE MAP: _____	
5.	WHERE WAS THE MAP PRODUCED? _____	
6.	MAP INFORMATION A. List three things in this map that you think are important. <span style="float: right; border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">Limit response for each question to a single line of text</span> 1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____ B. Why do you think this map was drawn? <span style="float: right; border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">Limit response for each question to 2 lines of text</span> _____ C. What evidence in the map suggests why it was drawn? _____ D. What information does this map add to the textbook's account of this event? _____ E. Does the information in this map support or contradict information that you have read about this event? Explain. _____ F. Write a question to the mapmaker that is left unanswered by this map. _____	
	Designed and developed by the Education Staff, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC 20408	<a href="#">Print Form</a>
	<a href="#">Reset Form</a>	

ANALYSIS OF CINEMATIC IMAGERY: SUBTEXT & IMPLICATION

Reset Form	Motion Picture Analysis Worksheet	Print Form								
<b>Step 1. Pre-viewing</b>										
A.	Title of Film: _____ Record Group Source: _____									
B.	What do you think you will see in this motion picture? List Three concepts or ideas that you might expect to see based on the title of the film. List some people you might expect to see based on the title of the film.									
	<table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <thead> <tr> <th style="text-align: left;">Concepts/Ideas</th> <th style="text-align: left;">People</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>1. _____</td> <td>1. _____</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2. _____</td> <td>2. _____</td> </tr> <tr> <td>3. _____</td> <td>3. _____</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Concepts/Ideas	People	1. _____	1. _____	2. _____	2. _____	3. _____	3. _____	
Concepts/Ideas	People									
1. _____	1. _____									
2. _____	2. _____									
3. _____	3. _____									
<b>Step 2. Viewing</b>										
A.	Type of motion picture (check where applicable):									
	<input type="checkbox"/> Animated Cartoon <input type="checkbox"/> Theatrical short subject <input type="checkbox"/> Documentary Film <input type="checkbox"/> Training film <input type="checkbox"/> Newsreel <input type="checkbox"/> Combat film <input type="checkbox"/> Propaganda Film <input type="checkbox"/> Other									
B.	Physical qualities of the motion picture (check where applicable):									
	<input type="checkbox"/> Music <input type="checkbox"/> Live action <input type="checkbox"/> Narration <input type="checkbox"/> Background noise <input type="checkbox"/> Special effects <input type="checkbox"/> Animation <input type="checkbox"/> Color <input type="checkbox"/> Dramatizations									
C.	Note how camera angles, lighting, music, narration, and/or editing contribute to creating an atmosphere in this film. What is the mood or tone of the film?									
<b>Step 3. Post-viewing (or repeated viewing)</b>										
A.	Circle the things that you listed in the previewing activity that were validated by your viewing of the motion picture.									
B.	What is the central message(s) of this motion picture?									
C.	Consider the effectiveness of the film in communicating its message. As a tool of communication, what are its strengths and weaknesses?									

## THE VISUAL AS ARTIFACT

Reset Form	Artifact Analysis Worksheet	Print Form
	<p>1. <b>TYPE OF ARTIFACT</b> Describe the material from which it was made: bone, pottery, metal, wood, stone, leather, glass, paper, cardboard, cotton, plastic, other material.</p> <hr/>	
	<p>2. <b>SPECIAL QUALITIES OF THE ARTIFACT</b> Describe how it looks and feels: shape, color, texture, size, weight, movable parts, anything printed, stamped or written on it.</p> <hr/>	
	<p>3. <b>USES OF THE ARTIFACT</b></p> <p>A. What might it have been used for? _____</p> <p>B. Who might have used it? _____</p> <p>C. Where might it have been used? _____</p> <p>D. When might it have been used? _____</p>	
	<p>4. <b>WHAT DOES THE ARTIFACT TELL US?</b></p> <p>A. What does it tell us about technology of the time in which it was made and used?</p> <hr/> <p>B. What does it tell us about the life and times of the people who made it and used it?</p> <hr/> <p>C. Can you name a similar item today?</p> <hr/>	
	<p>5. <b>BRING A SKETCH, A PHOTOGRAPH, OR THE ARTIFACT LISTED IN 4C ABOVE TO CLASS.</b></p>	
Reset Form	<p>Designed and developed by the Education Staff, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC 20408</p>	Print Form

LINKS TO IMAGE ARCHIVES, DIGITAL & AUDIO STORYTELLING:

<http://list.ly/list/dAI-digital-storytelling-tools>

<http://www.archives.gov/>

<http://www.si.edu/Collections>

<http://www.triquarterly.org/essay/on-the-form-video-essay>

<http://www.triquarterly.org/issues/issue-141/history>

<http://bresland.com/audio.html>

<http://www.triquarterly.org/issues/issue-141/grandpa>

<http://www.triquarterly.org/issues/issue-144/call-video-essays-and-cinemoems>

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