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Writing to Transgress: Autobiographies and Family Trees as Multimodal and Culturally Sustaining Writing Pedagogy

John Wesley White
University of North Florida, j.white@unf.edu

Cynthia Lynn Sumner
University of North Florida, n00974286@unf.edu

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Cover Page Footnote

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Writing to Transgress: Autobiographies and Family Trees as Multimodal and Culturally Sustaining Writing Pedagogy

John Wesley White, *University of North Florida*
Cynthia Lynn Sumner, *University of North Florida*

My hope emerges from those places of struggle where I witness individuals positively transforming their lives and the world around them. (hooks 2003, p. xiv)

Many years ago, Mina Shaughnessy cast teachers as fixers; they would help remedial students by preparing them for the dominant monolingual academic environment (1977). As professional urban educators we recognize that significant progress has been made in writing instruction and urban education since then. We understand when bell hooks tells us we need to “teach to transgress” to create communities of learners that “decenter” the teacher from their position of power in favor of egalitarian classes that teach and learn from each other (1994, p. 7). From Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) we recognize that it is both ethical and pedagogically sound to identify and honor our students’ identities and experiences and to use these as bridges to new learning. We also understand why Django Paris (2012) tells us that relevance is not quite enough—that we need to work to sustain students’ home languages and cultures by celebrating multilingualism and multiculturalism in our classroom curricula, pedagogies, and interactions. From all of these we adhere to the belief that the power structures inherent in race, class, and language, can be renegotiated and student identities can be re-envisioned so that they might remain rooted in cultures and histories rather than be subsumed into a homogenous academic persona. Finally, and as part of the eighty percent or more of white teachers who teach approximately ninety percent of the multilingual and minoritized students in urban schools, we commit to the notion that that we need to view our students’ cultures as a valuable form of capital that will benefit them (and

all of us) in the increasingly multicultural landscape of our country (Steinberg, 2010). As educational professionals, these are our ideologies and the tools in our wheelhouse.

Unfortunately, while our views as literacy educators have evolved dramatically over the past few decades, the views of those outside of our school doors have remained largely unchanged. The asset-based social justice approaches that we advocate run counter to the strong and entrenched popular opinion of what urban schools are like and what teachers are supposed to be doing. In popular culture, urban schools are veritable war zones and teachers therein are besieged. Success comes only when teachers—generally white and missionary-like—find the right culturally appropriate trick to reach and engage their students and lead them toward greater assimilation into mainstream culture. In this paradigm (and by extension in the views of many would-be new teachers), urban teachers have not moved from what Shaughnessy describes as the second stage of teacher change in increasingly diverse school environments: the offensive but unfortunately all too applicable “converting the natives” (1976, p. 235). For example, in the critically acclaimed HBO production *The Wire*, a policeman turned teacher shows his ineptitude when faced with an unruly inner city classroom; he gains students’ trust (and classroom control) only when he makes a curricular connection between statistics and gambling. In the movie *Dangerous Minds*, a former Marine turned teacher wins over her “rejects from hell” only after sporting a leather jacket, cursing in class, and demonstrating her martial arts skills. Similar themes play out in *The Blackboard Jungle*, *The Substitute*, *McFarland USA*, *The Ron Clark Story*, *Freedom Writers*, the list goes on. Engaging diverse students via superficial and often stereotyped cultural connections has become a trope of American culture—one that fits well with the colonizing white savior narrative endemic to this genre and to American society writ large. Cultural connectivity in schools is, then, not an equal exchange of ideologies and identities between teachers and students but a type of hegemony—a teaser to convince students to buy into greater cultural assimilation.

We critique this narrative not just because it reinforces harmful myths about cultures and teaching but because—through frequent repetition—it has become part of the miasma of educational reform that has trickled down into school-based writing instruction. We are, many educational policymakers believe, “A Nation at Risk” (the title of the highly influential Department of Education white paper published in 1983). Moved largely by fear, educational policymakers have for almost forty years now produced waves of test centered educational policies that focus intently on a Pygmalionesque remediation and molding of the students who least fit into the dominant monocultural standard. This certainly holds true for writing instruction, wherein our most vulnerable students receive the most scripted

and least-culturally aligned prompts and formats for their writing. This is backed not just by wide-scale studies and meta-analyses (see Salvio & Boldt (2009), Thomas (2012), and Wyatt (2014) for example) but by our own experiences. Last year, Cynthia (second author), was paired for her internship with what the school's principal described as "the best" ELA teacher in a large Title I high school. This teacher earned such an accolade from consistently having the school's highest numbers of passing scores on the state-mandated end-of-year exam (a big part of which is an essay). As Cynthia and John both saw, however, this teacher's "success" came at a significant cost to her students. Absent from this teachers' classroom were any books other than a set of ELA textbooks because, the teacher stated, "these kids don't read" and, if there were books in the room "these kids would just destroy them." According to this star teacher, books, posters, and other connections to literature and writing for self-expression were largely irrelevant because, as she stated, "you can't convince everyone to like reading and writing." Literary analysis in this classroom consisted almost exclusively of end-of-course exam preparation via examinations of quotes from the abridged pieces of literature in their textbooks. This was followed by direct instruction from the teacher on the greater meaning of the quotes and the kinds of ways students should respond to them. Writing instruction consisted of a short three week burst of regimented five paragraph essays with no redrafting of the first drafts due to a lack of time to practice writing and the need to prepare the students for actual essay test conditions. This teacher's classroom practices were not only sanctioned but recommended as worthy of emulation to other teachers. Both authors witnessed this teacher and her colleagues in their professional learning community (PLC) meetings and in an in-service training talking with the principal and peers about the need to "teach the standards, not the texts" (a mandate that came directly from top district administrators). In many high needs schools and districts, cultural relevance is acceptable only so long as it does not interfere with excruciatingly homogenous test preparation.

It should come as no surprise that these students, most of whom already believed that they were bad writers, seemed to grow to detest school-based writing even more as the year progressed (it is important to note here that these students engaged in myriad forms of successful writing but that most of these forms were not school-sanctioned). These test preparation writing approaches—which research shows is all too common in Title I schools—are little more than a pyrrhic victory for the educational establishment. While students receiving the test prep treatment do indeed show mild improvement on standardized tests, they learn to dislike academic writing all the more and, in turn, further divorce themselves from the powers and pleasures associated with being able to write well and across contexts.

As former English teachers and current English Language Arts educators, we seek to destroy the harmful myth that teaching to a test can produce proficient or engaged writers. We posit that there are more socially just and more culturally aware ways to engage diverse students in the ELA curricula than merely “converting the natives.” Further, we posit that writing, because it involves the author’s ideas and unique style, is a good place to start. Looking back at the first author’s teaching journals, classroom artifacts, and student data, we recount the challenges and successes that can result when, rather than convert natives, we instead begin to focus on how students might create their own narratives.

In what follows we use autoethnography (e.g., Ali-Khan, 2016) to dig into John’s teaching journals, personal reflections, curricular materials, and student artifacts from his time in the classroom. From this we integrate our shared understandings to explore an approach John took to engaging his students in writing. His detailed notes and reflections about using student-created family trees and autobiographies give us a sense of the difficulties and successes faced by teachers in urban settings who are well situated in education and social justice pedagogy, but still encounter resistance to “diving in” and enacting with these student centered practices that enable our students to recreate and shape another identity different from the seemingly indelible “remedial” label that they have been given (Shaughnessy, 1976).

Context

In 2004, John entered high school teaching with dreams of helping underprivileged students succeed. His students, who were overwhelmingly African American, Hispanic, below grade level, and from low socioeconomic households, came to the alternative high school in Denver after having been marginalized at or having been expelled from the district’s other high schools. The school featured small class sizes (<20 per class), one teacher per content area, and a teacher-student informality that was meant to foster trusting relationships. John’s job was to develop and teach 10th through 12th grade English Language Arts (ELA) curricula for mixed-grade classes.

As a middle-class white male, John was a culturally very different from his students; yet he was determined to engage in what bell hooks calls “teaching to transgress” (7)—to help his students succeed despite systems biased against them. Having been as immersed in the aforementioned narrative of teacher as savior, he naively trusted that he could foster students’ growth—in this case as writers—solely by combining the ELA methods he had learned with his passion for social justice and his appreciation for multiculturalism. Unfortunately, because he had not put much thought into *why* his students were reluctant to write, he initially

attempted to teach academic writing by using the same pedagogies and types of prompts that had served him well as a student.

However, while teaching his first writing-heavy ELA unit, John struggled to engage his students in putting their ideas to paper; he burned countless hours and hindered student buy-in to the writing process by his use of relatively esoteric literature-based writing prompts and by exhorting students to expend effort to address these prompts. His growing sense of failure as a teacher—and a corresponding desperation to engage his students in writing—pushed him toward a paradigm shift. He recognized that it wasn't so much his students' attitude that needed changing, it was his own; he needed to radically rethink *what* he was asking students to write about and *how* he was asking them to write.

The Need for a New Approach

John's 72 students had amazing stories of survival and strength, yet they spoke of deficit-focused schooling experiences that had silenced their stories. Almost all of them had histories of below grade-level reading scores. They had suffered frequent corrections to their "substandard" grammar, endured frequent disciplinary reprimands (many based upon cultural miscommunication), and had been relegated to remedial ELA classes. They had repeatedly encountered the kinds of ELA experiences that Kelly Gallagher describes in his book *Readicide*: "the systemic killing of the love of reading [and writing], often exacerbated by the inane, mind-numbing practices found in schools" (2). Even though John's students wrote frequently and in culturally appropriate ways for their own purposes—composing text messages, emails, poems, and song lyrics—they had become convinced either that they could not be good academic writers or that there was no reason to try. Thus, John's task was to find ways that his students might feel comfortable with writing—where *they* were the experts.

Radically departing from his district's ELA curriculum, John came up with the idea of merging basic student research (family interviews), the creation of individual family trees, and the writing of student autobiographies (Figure 1). This departure brought amazing results; students dove into this assignment and produced written projects that were both longer and of better quality than their prior efforts. Far more surprising, however, was the fact that many outwardly stoic and deeply guarded students used their autobiographies to bravely and openly detail deeply personal life events. By sharing their stories with their teacher, students transcended the barriers between them in almost all of their school-based interactions. With their writing, students bridged the cultural chasms that separated them from their teacher rather than the other way around.

Family Trees and Autobiographies

Philip Bernhardt notes that student-produced autobiographies “can provide a valuable context for self-reflection, shared experience, and mutual understanding” (61). The genre is unique in that it can serve as both communication and self-exploration. Autobiographies can also serve a model for student writers in that they tend to follow a simple chronological structure: “most students need models and some direct instruction to gain facility with this kind of writing. They also need the kind of scaffolding (and explicit framework of steps) in their assignments that gives them both an organizational scheme and guidelines for using inquiry strategies” (National Writing Project, 23). Because autobiographies attend to the self they are also part of what Gloria Ladson-Billings calls culturally relevant pedagogy—teaching that provides a way for “students to maintain their cultural integrity while succeeding academically” (476). Cultural relevance is key to student buy-in to writing; research demonstrates that students write best and most prolifically when the topic is close to their hearts. Finally, the process of researching and creating the finished autobiographies would meet numerous state ELA standards. Autobiographies would, John hoped, both scaffold his students’ writing and be a relatively easy “sell” to them.

However, the first step in the writing process could not be actual writing; rather, John and his students first needed to create a framework for writing that differentiated the steps involved in a research paper (and that could serve as an outline).

Family Trees as Scaffolds for Writing

To start the assignment, students were to conduct basic research on their families via an interview with a family elder, examinations of family photo albums and family Bibles, and/or online research (see Figure 1). The interviews would help students get a better understanding of their families and histories, they would further invest students in the project, and they would be a relatively low-stress means of engaging in basic research. To enhance student buy-in to the task and to help students learn basic interview techniques (i.e., higher and lower order questioning, ordinate and subordinate information, and follow-up questions), John and his students developed the interview questions together (Figure 2). John stressed throughout this process that students could develop their own questions and/or let the interviewee tell their story in their own way. To capture the content of the interviews, students could simply take notes or they could record the session (in a few cases students had parents answer the questions in writing).

Once students had completed their interviews and basic online research, they engaged in a “data analysis” activity meant to help them organize their information. After John had coached students on the basic premises of coding

qualitative data, the class used a sample paper to brainstorm possible coding categories and then color-coded parts of the text for each category (including separate color schemes for categories that overlapped). While John sometimes used probing questions to elicit coding categories, students proved remarkably insightful in creating what qualitative researcher James Spradley refers to as “domains” for analysis (107). Using multi-colored highlighters, students then coded their interviews and any additional information they had collected. This step was important in that it reinforced how to read critically—with a specific goal in mind—and it modeled for students how to organize main ideas, supporting ideas, and evidence. It also highlighted relationships across different forms of data (e.g., something an interviewee had said and a notation in a family Bible).

In the next step of the process, students used their research to create a family tree and with it a visual representation of their data. Writing research has shown that art provides a strong segue into writing: “there is an important link between drawing and writing...especially when teachers support students in using drawing as preparation for writing rather than as a nice accompanying visual to do after the fact” (Hale, 82). John’s hope was that family trees might function as a kind of semantic map to help students organize their papers and also serve as a visual model for and supplement to their own stories. This part of the process tapped into multimodal ways of learning and self-expression that might engage students in ways that text alone would not. Donald Murray tells us that autobiography “grows from a few deep taproots that are set down into our past in childhood” (67). As these students’ school participation and voices have been unwittingly oppressed by their previous educational experiences and the cultural dissonance between their “ways with words” (Heath, 1983) and the discourses expected in schools (Nelson & Lind, 2015), a family tree that leads to autobiography might act as a sort of therapy and a place of negotiation—a place where students might escape “the societal power relations and inequality [that] may reproduce themselves within the academic field” (Senehi, 2015, p. 14). As students interview, gather data, and talk about the people and things that influenced their lives, they begin to make “meaning of the life I have led and am leading and may lead.” Through this process, students might experience something unique to writers: to “become what we write” (Murray, 1991, p. 70). Writing that crosses from personal to academic can truly be transformative and help students create new identities that allow them to regard themselves and be regarded differently within the educational system and within their lives.

To explain the basic function of a family tree (and at the danger of falling prey to stereotype threat), John used the analogy of the NCAA basketball tournament bracket. The different “regions” represented in the tournament are analogous to different families or parts of families; teams within each region are

analogous to couples, from whom come offspring. From the different college teams (and their contexts) eventually comes a winner—which in this case is analogous to the student at the center of her/his family tree. The class then examined different types of online family trees: new and historic, vertically and horizontally aligned, those in the actual shape of a tree, etc. Using found examples, the class both explored the structure of family trees and noted that there were myriad formats and genres that one can use to represent family history (Figure 3). John's purposes in examining different trees was twofold: 1) to increase student buy-in to the project by helping them see that they could choose from multiple formats in the creation of their trees and, 2) to explain the format to students who might not be very familiar with it. Family trees are unique cultural artifacts that are not necessarily common across cultures. For example, Amy Harmon (2007) has noted many black families cannot, due to slavery and the dehumanizing effects thereof, trace their family lineage very far back through traditional family trees. Other researchers, such as Walter Ong (1982), have noted that many cultures rely on oral storytelling to maintain a record of their history and the maintenance of their cultures. In short, prior to this assignment, many of John's students were unfamiliar with the concept of family trees.

Finally, once the students had completed their trees they used the organizational schema therein to write their autobiographies. The prompt for their written papers included specific steps to help them with the structure and content of their papers (Figure 4). John left the specific format of the narrative up to the students so as to not limit the ways in which they might express themselves. Cognizant of research that highlights the benefits of multi-genre and multi-media representations of student writing, John encouraged students to consider including photos and images of artifacts in their written autobiographies. The class then used a week's worth of class time to do the bulk of the writing and revisions; based on John's experiences thus far, assigning the autobiographies as homework would neither have brought good results nor have allowed him to work with students in small groups and individually. Once students had completed rough drafts, John provided general feedback, a key for editing drafts, and devoted two more days of class time for them to complete their revisions.

Successes and Surprises

Once John changed his own approach to the teaching of writing, his students' attitudes toward writing (at least in this assignment) began to change as well. At the beginning of the project, almost all of his students brought in pictures of their families and of themselves as children (which John copied and printed for a banner to go around the top of the classroom walls and which students later incorporated into their texts). Sixty-six out of 72 students (across his classes)

conducted an interview, and three of those who had not nonetheless produced an autobiography. Because students were working on projects about what they knew best—their families and themselves—they seldom ran short on contents and contexts; all they needed from John was scaffolding in the mechanics of writing. During the unit, John began to notice a qualitative difference in the nature of his prompting: it had shifted from cajoling students to write to encouraging them to dive more deeply into specific contexts of their stories and providing them with help in word choice and syntax to make their writing more powerful. While the overall writing quality in students' first drafts differed little from their previous written work, there was far more quantity and depth to their texts. Their final drafts, however, showed significant improvement in quality; having been more engaged in their content, John's students became invested in representing that content in ways that their reader could understand.

Seeing his students engaged in academic writing—and better representing themselves and their views in writing—proved rewarding in ways that John had not experienced elsewhere in the classroom. Over the course of this unit, he saw that his students were not resistant to writing; they just needed the right things to write about. This experience thus fostered in John a renewed energy to find other ways to empower his students to tell their truths. The project also, in some small way, helped strengthen his students' self-efficacy as writers. Many students re-engaged in trying to write for classroom purposes for the first time in years. Others experienced their first “success” as academic writers (demonstrated by products that they were proud to share, by better grades, and by more positive interactions with their teacher). A few even far exceeded the required length for their papers—something John had never experienced before. For the first time, John's class had become a community of writers. Getting there, however, was not without complications and surprises. These complications and surprises also serve to tell part of his students' stories.

Nontraditional Family Structures and Asymmetrical Family Trees

As students started to create their family trees, John and his students also began to debate how best to represent the nontraditional family structures common to many of the students. At the crux of the debate was whether or not to include absent parents on students' trees. Some students insisted that an absent parent should be represented regardless of her/his active participation in child rearing—as one student noted, “he [an absent father] still has an impact even if he isn't around.” Others expressed their belief that “one good parent” or caring grandparents more than made up for an absent parent and thus there was no need to include the latter on the family tree. John and his students ultimately came to the consensus that

because family trees are personal, they should reflect their creator's values and experiences rather than conform to a specific or traditional format.

While most students' family trees followed one of the formats we had examined (Figure 3), many students took the freedom they were given to alter their trees to better fit their family contexts and their views. For example, one student included his absent father in his tree—a man whom he said he “hardly knows” in his autobiography—in a way that represented the impact of this absence on his development. Dewan's tree was lush on his mother's side but virtually dead on his father's side (see Figure 5). Another student created a tree with a weak trunk to represent her absent parents but with vibrant and flowering branches to represent her loving grandparents (who had been her primary caregivers). A teenaged mother created a tree with her daughter as the roots; in her subsequent autobiography she noted that her daughter “kept her rooted” and made her stronger.

In short, students' debates about if and how to depict nontraditional family structures combined with the freedom they had to represent this in their own ways proved essential to what they later wrote about in their autobiographies. In the early stages of the writing process, students used peers' ideas to help frame their own histories and identities and they used art as exploration of the meaning of family in their lives. And in creating their unique family trees, they thought deeply about who and what had influenced their development. From this, they lifted veils in their writing; they included in their autobiographies a level of self-reflection and a willingness to share that they had previously and tenaciously guarded.

Autobiography as Connection

Because most of John's students had experienced significant oppression, racism, classism, and inequitable experiences in their schooling (from teachers and school administrators who looked and talked like John), they were initially extremely reluctant to show vulnerabilities. If anything, they tended to couch their insecurities behind bravado and by challenging his authority. Thus, John was happily surprised when a significant number of students used their autobiographies as a means toward deep and honest self-reflection, confession, and to connect with him.

For example, in one of the most memorable events of his classroom teaching experiences, a student used her autobiography to explore a deeply personal traumatic event that was resurfacing due to family circumstances. Janette (a pseudonym) explained how, in her prepubescent years, her mother's brother had sexually molested her when they were alone together (which was relatively often as he frequently volunteered to “babysit” while her single mother worked or ran errands). Janette described how she carried with her a sense of conflict and shame; she knew that her uncle's actions were wrong yet she felt powerless to stop him.

She described how, having been “coached” by her uncle on what to say (and not to say) and knowing her mother’s closeness to him, she had had no faith that her mother would believe her story were she to report the crime. And as is common to many survivors of sexual assault, Janette felt guilt and shame for actions over which she had no control.

As troublesome as Janette’s story was, her trauma was far from over. Explaining why she had been so distracted and even hostile in school over the past weeks—“I know I been hard”—she told how her mother was planning a party to celebrate her uncle’s imminent release from prison (he had been convicted for this sexual assault). Janette loved her mother dearly but felt betrayed by the latter’s seeming disregard for her daughter’s emotional wellbeing. Her mother’s claim that her uncle “had done his time” was far from sufficient for pacifying Janette’s feelings of hurt.

In knowing that her piece would have a reader (John), it can be argued that Janette was seeking a way to unburden herself. She wanted—and found—someone to whom she could trust with sensitive information, someone who would believe her story, and someone who would remind her that she was worthy of love. In subsequent private conversations, she told John how good it had felt for her to “at least be able to tell somebody” and to have an adult who could help buoy her through this difficult period. There can be no doubt that Janette’s willingness to confide in John had a lot to do with time and with his repeated (and often rebuked) attempts to connect with her over the previous months. Yet, we also believe that this assignment gave Janette an appropriate and safe space wherein she could express her deepest feelings and seek out the support she needed.

While Janette’s story was more shocking than those of her peers, she was not alone in using her autobiography to communicate with John and to seek his help. A number of other students wrote about personal concerns that they felt reluctant to talk about in person. One described being under pressure from her boyfriend “to get serious” (to have sexual intercourse) and from her friends to stop being a “tease.” She wanted reassurance from John that her decision to remain a virgin was legitimate. Another student, fearing that she might be pregnant, described her fear of becoming a teenaged mother (like her own mother before her). She sought John’s opinion on the moral acceptability of abortion and asked—not rhetorically—how she might seek one. A third student described his conflicting feelings about being openly gay in a classroom where he heard repeated slurs about homosexuals. He sought from John ways to confront such slurs without alienating himself from his peers. He also wanted affirmation that college would be different.

These students (and others) used their autobiographies not just to complete an assignment. Rather, they used their writing to give voice to their identities, to their experiences, and to connect with their teacher. Students’ work on this

assignment more than met the learning goals undergirding it; their writing connected John and his students in entirely new ways.

Conclusion

The successes we note above—namely, students’ willingness to engage in the writing process and share their histories with their teacher—came about not due to any radical shift in their attitude toward writing; rather, they came about because of a radical shift in *John’s approach* to the teaching of writing. It was only after he had shifted his view of what “counts” as academic writing and only after he developed prompts that were individually meaningful to his students that they had the space they needed to tap into their rich reservoirs of content, feeling, and passion. Upon being given the space to tell their stories in ways that were not overly constricted, these students proved themselves willing to engage in the writing process, to use writing to reflect upon deeply personal life events, and to make themselves vulnerable in unforeseen ways. Once freed to tell their stories—and freed from the more esoteric and formulaic confines of much of the writing required during high school—John’s students showcased their talents, tenacity, and bravery as writers and as people.

However, and as suggested earlier, we fear that opportunities like these are increasingly rare. In an era of scripted writing curricula, the demand for “college and career ready” students, and high stakes student testing—that include rubric-evaluated writing samples based upon prompts—it is easy to understand why many writing teachers focus their efforts on relatively formulaic writing styles and on preparing students for tests. What the experiences above point out, however, is that a reliance upon scripted ways of teaching writing may be silencing our most vulnerable students. Students have powerful stories to tell when given the space to do so. Even reluctant writers will engage in the writing process when the final product has true personal meaning to them. When students are given the space and the means to tell their truths, they begin to learn the secret of good writing.

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January Block Part One: Family History

Rationale: *In order for you—or for anyone else—to know who you are and where you are going, it is necessary to know from where you came. This includes your family's history (recent and distant), their beliefs, the way in which you were raised, etc.*

Step # 1: Create a family tree/family history

- Using as an example/model the family tree we created in class, try to construct one of your own.
- Use family members, a family Bible, or other documents to trace back your family as far as possible
- Fill in family “tree”

Step # 2: Add details to family tree, making note of such things as:

- o Places your family/ancestors lived (U.S. and before if possible)
 - Why did they come to the U.S.?¹
 - When did they come to the U.S.?
 - How did they/you end up in Colorado?
- o Jobs held by relatives
- o Educational level attained by relatives
- o The beliefs (general and specific) held by relatives
 - Conservative, liberal
 - Religion, work ethic
 - Goals for family/children

Step # 3: Interview *at least one* old/older family member²

- When possible, this should be a grandparent, great-grandparent, great uncle/aunt, etc.). Otherwise, you may interview a parent, aunt/uncle, etc.).
- Use interview questions designed in class
 - o Remember, the purpose of this assignment is to learn new things about your family, their history, beliefs, etc.
- Write out full responses and/or use tape recorder to capture important information.

Step # 4: Bring the family history to life with artifacts and photos

- Take photos of family members and close family friends (pastors, old family friends, aunts, uncles, neighbors, etc.) who are influential in your life or your family's life
- Collect, photocopy, or photograph family artifacts that have importance to the family (family Bible, art in home, documents of importance). In other words, collect ‘stuff’ that has importance to you and your family, that helps explain who you/they are!

Step # 5: Organize your data for inclusion in autobiography/family history paper

¹ Remember that, with the exception of Native Americans, our families are all immigrants to this country. For that matter, even ancient Native Americans immigrated here thousands of years ago.

² Significant extra credit will be given to students who interview more than one relative/old person in community.

Figure 1

Overview of Assignment Given to Students: Autobiography, Family Tree, and Interview

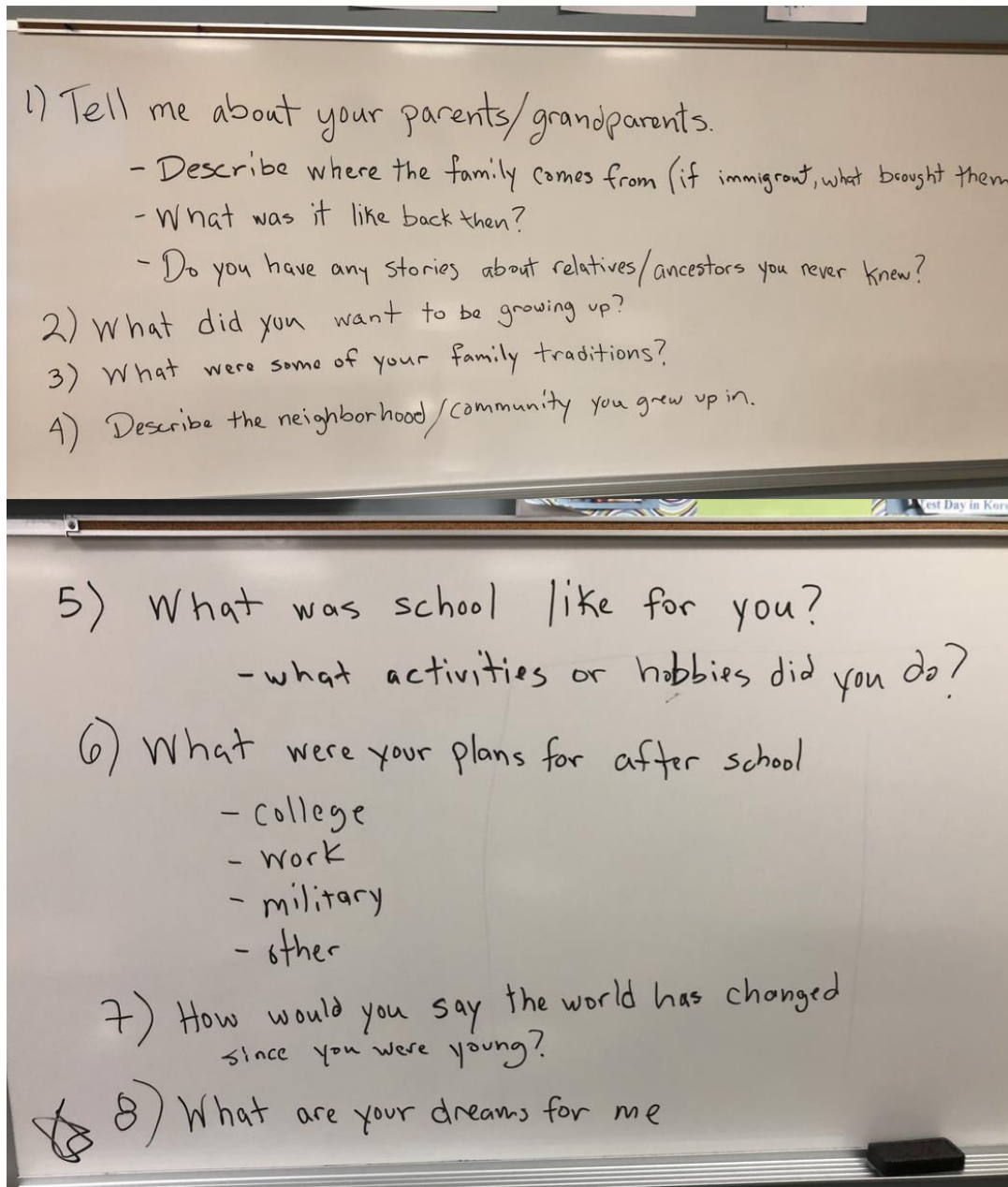


Figure 2
Student & Teacher Chosen Family Interview Questions

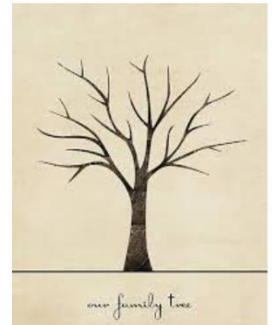
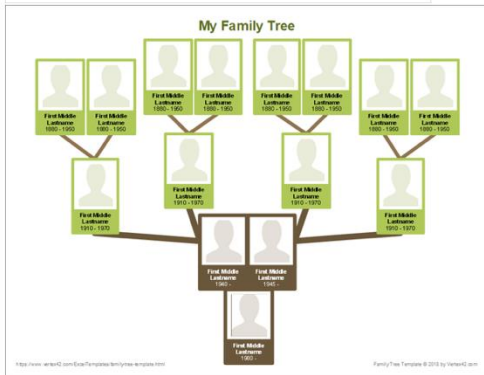
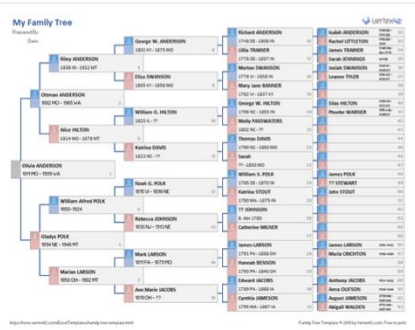


Figure 3
Models of Family Trees

January Block Part Two: Autobiography

Rationale: Having researched your family's background, you should be better prepared to discuss your own life and experiences. Who are you and how did you come to be this person? What are the significant experiences that shaped your life and beliefs?

Step # 1: Outline your life history

- Create a chart or an outline with the main events in your life
- Examine your beliefs
 - o What are the ideas that drive you to achieve?
 - o Why are you in school now?
 - o Where do you want to go and why (career, education, family)?

Step # 2: Try to combine your family history with or into your own autobiography

- Create a section that includes all of the information from the family history assignment

OR

- Incorporate the family history information into your own autobiography

Step # 3: Write-up

- Typed, 4-5 pages
- Organized and grammatically correct
- Include, when possible, photos or artifacts from family (extra credit for incorporating photos into text)¹
- Include the detailed family tree (on a separate sheet of paper)

Figure 4

Writing Prompt & Suggested Steps for Student Autobiography



Figure 5
Example of a Student's Family Tree