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Making a Place: Autobiography in Composition Classrooms

Fred Barton

I very much like people telling me about their childhood, but they'd better be quick, or else I'll be telling them about mine.

Dylan Thomas

Chapter One: Discovery and Disappointment

Outside of my classroom window, the late winter sun was just over the horizon, casting long, sharp shadows across the parking lot. Inside, 30 faces in my first-hour "Techniques of Composition" class prepared, each in his or her own unique way, to endure another "unit."

"How many of you know what an autobiography is?" I began hopefully.

"Life story of a car." That was Jason in the second row. I could always count on him to steer a wide path around anything that smelled even faintly of academics.

"Anyone? Anyone at all." A gust of laughter blew through the class. They liked watching Jason and me perform our little ritual: I was the put upon teacher, he the deft wit, always a step or two ahead. To close the act I walked down the aisle until I was past his seat and my back was to him. "Anyone?" I asked again. More laughter. Finally, Sara volunteered that it was a person's life story told by that person, and we were off.

Actually, I stumbled into using autobiography in my class as the result of a book I read by Robert Graham titled *Reading and Writing the Self*. It is a history and discussion of the various roles autobiography has played in the English curriculum throughout the years, but it was a passage in a

chapter titled "Dewey and Self-Realization" that really made me consider autobiography for my classroom. Graham wrote: ". . . the value of autobiography in education, (is) a value that, it is held, comes closest to embodying in its purest form the major educational goal of self realization, a goal that Dewey argued was the *sine qua non* of a truly child-centered approach" (53). Two elements of that passage struck home with me. One, it was a reference to John Dewey, an educator and philosopher for whom I have the deepest respect and admiration, and two, it spoke to the issue of self-realization which, though I may have had other words for it, I firmly believe is one of the fundamental goals of education in a democratic society.

So I set off to incorporate autobiography into my classes. Having been strongly influenced by Britton's language-centered approach, I became convinced that autobiography was the way to take students from "spectators" to "participants." I brought autobiographies into my class like *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou, *Soul on Ice* by Eldridge Cleaver, and *Chapters From My Autobiography* by Mark Twain, to name a few. I played records by Bill Cosby and read snippets from other sources. Then I turned the students loose to create what I was sure would be the best writing of the term.

The results were dismal.

The writings were, in large part, stale, dry and vapid. The students were guarded, and even the best ones were merely reporters. "I was born on . . ." "My first grade teacher was. . ." "My mother's maiden name was. . ." "My grandfather came to America in. . ." As (bad) luck would have it, at the same time as my students were disillusioning me, I also happened to be taking a class in which we learned that an alternative way of thinking about English education had grown up in England concurrent with Britton's "London School." It was called the "Cambridge School," and one of its proponents, Douglas Barnes, along with his wife Dorothy Barnes and Stephan Clarke, had written a book called *Versions of English* in which, among other things, they reported on an exhaustive study on the use of autobiography. They were reporting on schools in England, but what they found could have come right out of my classes. Barnes wrote that students had difficulty getting beyond the listing of facts about their lives; they often assumed their personal language wasn't suitable to the classroom language, and so their writing became stilted; and they were uncomfortable writing about personal issues (100-102). Barnes' biggest complaint against autobiography, however, was that it focused the students inward to the exclusion of social relations and thinking about issues larger than personal experience.

That bothered me. I wanted my students to be comfortable in the increasingly diverse and multifaceted society I felt they were going to inherit. Now I had to confront the possibility that I had been working against my own fundamental principles.

Chapter Two: Thinking the Problem Through

I stopped doing the autobiographical unit in my classes, telling myself it was because the writing wasn't as good as I'd hoped it would be, but I didn't stop thinking about what I had read both for and against the technique. I didn't really want to agree with Barnes' critique of autobiography, but I had to admit that the problems he reported were the same ones I saw in my classes. His solution was to move towards more fictional styles of writing, but I was still hoping to find a way of saving

the non-fiction nature of the exercise because I felt it was a straighter path to the level of reflection I wanted the students to achieve.

I went back and forth on autobiography for a couple of years until I happened to read *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* by Annie Dillard. There was a passage early in the book where she wrote about a frog getting eaten by a water beetle:

He didn't jump. I crept closer. At last I knelt on the island's winterkilled grass, lost, dumbstruck, staring at the frog in the creek just four feet away. He was a very small frog with wide, dull eyes. And just as I looked at him, he slowly crumpled and began to sag. The spirit vanished from his eyes as if snuffed. His skin emptied and drooped; his very skull seemed to collapse and settle like a kicked tent. He was shrinking before my very eyes like a deflating football. I watched the taut, glistening skin on his shoulders ruck, and rumple, and fall. Soon, part of his skin, formless as a pricked balloon, lay in floating folds like bright scum on top of the water: it was a monstrous and terrifying thing. I gaped bewildered, appalled. An oval shadow hung in the water behind the drained frog; then the shadow glided away. The frog skin bag started to sink. . . I couldn't catch my breath. (5-6)

Me either. While Dillard's book isn't an autobiography per se, it was precisely the kind of power she unleashed in describing the death of that frog that drew me to non-fiction prose in the first place. I firmly believed that my students could draw powerful writing from their lives if I could just find a way to get them to look past the surface and write from themselves instead of for me.

Slowly, my vision of autobiography began to shrink. It occurred to me that my students often saw their lives like Tinker Creek, a linear, albeit sometimes meandering flow of events and experiences. They had not stopped to investigate the little pools of meaning where time's current slows down and experience deepens. Perhaps they hadn't yet

realized that those pools even existed. I began to incorporate exercises that were designed to help students investigate the backwaters of their lives. We sometimes started by making lists of areas in our lives where others' expectations of us and our own dreams and goals diverged. Then we would use that as a jumping off place for an exploration. Questions ranged from "What did I ever do to convince my parents that I should be an 'A' student?" to "How have I mistakenly taught my teachers I'm a clone of my older brother?" to "What did I do to get the friends I have?" Each asked the students to view elements of their lives through a frame of meaning. Instead of a running total of experiences, we tried to settle around an aspect of our lives and delve into it.

The writing got marginally better. Some students were able to abstract a larger perspective out of their explorations, and some were not. I did notice that the students' language became more authentic. It seemed the focus on explaining some aspect of their lives allowed them to forget for a time they were in an "English" class and try instead to get their points across. I felt I had overcome one of Barnes' objections to autobiography, but his shadow still loomed over my efforts. The students still spent the majority of their time naming experience, and stepping away from the personal to think about larger perspectives was still somewhere over the horizon.

It has always surprised (and sometimes frustrated) me that whenever I go looking for something, I usually find it has been standing in front of me all along. I had used Maxine Hong Kingston's autobiography *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Ghost* for several years, but one time as I was re-reading it, a particular passage stepped out and introduced itself to me as if for the first time:

The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. May my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to them. What we have in common are the words at our backs. The ideographs for revenge are "report a crime" and "report to five families." The reporting is the vengeance—not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words. And

I have so many words—'chink' words and 'gook' words too—that they do not fit on my skin. (53)

What she was saying was the warrior has a sword and the writer has words. Just as the warrior sought revenge through the sword for the wrongs done to her people, Kingston sought revenge through her words for the wrongs done to her. I saw that the autobiography was directed at someone. Now the pieces began to fall into place. Barnes had argued for a shift to fictional forms of writing in classrooms, and I had resisted that because I felt students could draw power and perspective from their own lives. Dillard helped begin to solve the power of non-fiction writing, but Kingston gave me the final piece of the puzzle. I didn't want my students to write fictional autobiographies, but what prevented them from looking at their lives with a fiction writer's eye? What prevented them from thinking about the elements of their lives with a fiction writer's perspective? A perspective that sees the work in a larger context; that visions the work in a larger world than that of diary or journal writing; a perspective that wants to use the work as a tool to do some job on the reader. I could finally banish the shadow of Barnes' study from my class by inviting in, not fictional forms, but fictional stances. I could encourage my students to use the eye of a fictional writer to create a world for readers out of the material of their lives, and then, invite readers into that world through shared experiences. Now autobiographical writing fit even closer with my goals because, while the fiction writer was free to set his or her own stage, the autobiographer had to study the details of his or her life closely to discover the elements of meaning that would be the seeds of the story.

Chapter Three: No Beetles in this Pond (Hopefully)

Shortly after this revelation I ran across an article by Nancy Kaczmarek describing how she used two drafts of Virginia Woolf's autobiography to help her students see how the non-fiction author seeks

to affect the reader much the same as the fictional writer does. At one point she wrote: "On the surface 'Reminiscences' (the first draft) . . . is addressed to Woolf's nephew. However, she also wrote this memoir for herself: she used it as a writing practice . . . In 'A Sketch of the Past' (the later draft) on the other hand, the audience is just the opposite . . . (T)here is some sense of another reader, a you, as when she explains things which are perfectly clear to herself, but not to anyone else . . ." (84).

Woolf was the perfect example of what I was thinking. She was a fiction writer, and I felt certain she couldn't turn off that part of herself when she decided to write non-fiction. And why should she? Why should my students, some of whom were pretty good storytellers anyway?

Dylan Thomas wrote, "The way to begin a story depends not so much upon what you mean by a story as upon the story itself and the public for which it is intended" (38). This became the starting point for my autobiographical unit. Instead of beginning with the specific and personal, we begin with the general and social. Now we read sample works looking for the author's underlying purpose. We seek to understand not the what of autobiography, but the why. Class discussion revolves not around chronology, or narrative structure, but around love, loss, anger, joy and the myriad other ways that writers reach out to us and say, "You are not alone." Then we investigate the raw material of our own lives from which we hope to create our own message to put in a bottle and throw into the ocean, hoping, like all story tellers, that somewhere, sometime, on some perhaps deserted beach, some lonely traveler will find it and connect, as E.B. White said, "just connect."

So now, when the current Jason has had his moment, and the current Sara finally says autobiography is the story of someone's life written by that person, my starting point is the word story. Our entry into the form is not structure, but purpose. Our models are frogs who gave their lives so we can see, warriors who unsheathe their words so we can know, and students who seek meaning in the world outside themselves.

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About the Author

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