

ABSTRACT

Title of dissertation: NARRATIVE AND PERSONAL LITERACY: DEVELOPING
A PEDAGOGY OF CONFIDENCE-BUILDING FOR THE
WRITING CLASSROOM

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The literacy narrative is unique in what it can contribute to composition studies, illustrating both how our culture inhibits literacy and how people overcome difficult obstacles in learning to read and write. They highlight for writing teachers the life lessons that have advanced people toward their literacy goals. My analysis of literacy narratives points out how home, school, and community forces compete for different meanings of being literate. These stories are often about the struggle for and triumph of confidence. Understanding the sources of support can be especially valuable to teachers. I believe literacy narratives can help teachers develop a pedagogy centered on a most crucial function of educators: confidence-building.

As my students and literacy narratives document, teachers commonly believe they should eradicate local slangs, exacerbating the students' sense of alienation. I suggest enhancing the students' sense of worth as communicators by allowing them to see how the skills they call their own are already accepted as part of the school standard.

Writing pedagogies that use personal narrative assignments reach out to students by bringing their lives into the classroom. Using literacy narratives in class narrows the life focus to

personal struggles and successes with reading and writing in school. I suggest using lessons-learned narratives to bring the students' personal language uses into their essays. Through lessons-learned narratives, my pedagogy aims to uncover the students' personal communicative influences, strengthening their sense of power as communicators. Telling stories of how their language use has emerged through their surroundings lets students exploit the multiple nature of literacy. Analyzing my students' essays, I explain how to connect various rhetorical concepts to skills the students already possess. Through this pedagogy, the students' expertise is defined by their personal knowledge as well as by school standards. Once teachers are made aware of the students' personal standards, those standards become a source of strength as they are adapted to other academic rhetorical situations.

NARRATIVE AND PERSONAL LITERACY:
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FOR THE WRITING CLASSROOM

by

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Chapter 1 : Introduction

The first time I truly held the attention of a roomful of students as a Teaching Assistant at Brooklyn College, I saw in their eyes an esteemed image of myself. Writing down what I had to say, waiting through my pauses, laughing too hard at my jokes, these students seemed to actually admire me. Many of them appeared to hold me up as a model communicator. Perhaps many teachers are drawn to the profession for these giddy moments of being a prized influence.

My seventh grade English teacher had that kind of effect on me. I worshiped Mr. Lowe; he was easy-going, funny, and captivated me with his profound poetic insights. Come to think of it, he loved ice hockey and *Monty Python* as I did—he even stood at about my height, 5'7". Identifying with Mr. Lowe no doubt made me all the more attentive to his classroom lessons. And I could probably trace my own teaching style and even desire to teach to Dave Lowe.

Certainly not all teachers become their students' life influences, nor should they need to. And by the time students reach college age, many such influences have already solidified. But central to the teaching profession is the ability to model effectively for students. So, what if the modeling teachers present does not meet up to the shaping influences of the students? What if the teacher does not reflect the language and communicative style a student feels comfortable with? What happens to a student's confidence when the language she is most comfortable with does not seem to fit into the classroom?

I now teach at medium-sized liberal arts university on the East Coast; the school is also 95% African American. As a white teacher I don't have the easy connection I had with my many Irish-American Brooklyn College students. At times I even inadvertently push myself farther away from my students, as when I mispronounced Tupac Shikur's name ("Too-PACK" instead of "Too-POCK"). That was eight years ago, but their snickering still motivates me to pay attention to stories on rap stars and hip-hop culture. I know many of my colleagues, both black and white, could have made the same mistake. And it seems absurd to think that every student needs to identify with the teacher in order to succeed in the class. But the alienation some students feel by simply walking into a college classroom might be exacerbated when the instructor seems very different from them. Since teachers can't always match up magically with students to comfort and inspire them, educators might consider what can be done pedagogically to help students exploit the influences that provide them such reassurance.

Approaches to teaching composition that conscientiously account for the students' backgrounds are pedagogies based on confidence building. Teachers helping students get closer to their academic goals inevitably develop such methods. Though educators often choose their careers because of their knack to draw students in, research rarely attends to how we should handle student alienation. As Paul Beauvais points out in his study of freshmen encountering college culture, "While several scholars have offered promising proposals for utilizing the classroom contact zone to explore power and difference, I have not seen a study of how the classroom might be used to explore what may be the most pressing concern facing first-year college students: their adjustment to life on a college campus" (26). Adjusting to the way teachers and students speak in class, to the readings

assigned, to the writing expected can leave an unconfident student feeling unsuited to the classroom. Mike Rose details some of these struggles, explaining how "Freshmen are often puzzled by the talk they hear in their classrooms" (192) because it is filled with terms and concepts specific to academia. As a result, students often freeze up when they see academic language they are "supposed to know" (145).

Over the past several years, I have observed the speaking and writing confidence in my students. I have noticed that the confidence level many students demonstrate speaking in class does not always translate to their papers. In fact, in some cases, the most outspoken students were the ones who struggled the most as writers. To understand this gap, I studied my students' role models to see who their communicative influences might be. I discovered that, in many cases, my students admired communicative models that were at odds with the standards I have been hired to teach. Many of my students also face a linguistic challenge when trying to adapt their language uses from home to essay writing. These gaps typically reflect cultural differences between what one learns at home versus what is taught at school. And the farther the distance, the more stress there is moving from one community into the other. This particular tension is dramatized in a personal narrative genre called literacy narrative. In these stories, characters describe the challenges faced and surmounted in adapting to the literacy expectations of school. Similar to characters in literacy narratives, I often see my students caught in that tension, either tirelessly working to overcome feelings of inadequacy in school or paralyzed by the daunting gap they face in meeting the school standard.

This dissertation covers an approach for teaching college writing developed through the use of literacy narratives. Among writing genres, the literacy narrative is

unique in what it can contribute to composition studies. Literacy narratives illustrate both how our culture inhibits literacy and how people overcome such obstacles. They highlight for writing teachers the actual lessons that have advanced people toward their literacy goals. In some ways they are a critique of current English class teaching methods. Following the narrator, one sees the solo path some have to take to a place instructors are supposed to help them reach. This genre documents the needs of disenfranchised learners, from the perspective of their later accomplished selves. Literacy narratives are examples of self-survival pedagogies, approaches that offer much support to the teaching of literacy in rhetoric and composition theory.

One lesson that has already been recognized in this genre is their value as models for students.¹ The genre serves as a pedagogical tool itself. It offers students ways to move along the path of acquiring new literacies. Reading literacy narratives allows students to identify with the particular concerns of others learning to write. Writing literacy narratives allows for an opportunity to validate one's own experience in learning to communicate. The genre makes academic writing more accessible both because the students are the experts and because the final product describes their connection to the "literate" world.

Another reason literacy narratives promise so much value to rhetoric and composition studies is that they identify the most important needs in some of our least comfortable students. These stories typically dramatize the tensions of moving from one linguistic community into a new, more empowered one. And the more disparate the communities, the higher the drama. Forces opposing the narrator's movement must be

¹ In "Translating Self and Difference in Literacy Narratives," Mary Soliday argues that reading literacy narratives gives students alternative models, allowing "students to represent themselves in reference to each others' literacy stories and to those of professional writers" (523).

overcome, and the drama often hinges on the way new strength is acquired. These stories can often be seen as the struggle and triumph of confidence. Where the support comes from is especially valuable to teachers, I think. I believe that literacy narratives can help teachers develop pedagogy centered on a most crucial function of educators: confidence-building.

This dissertation explains how I have made use of literacy narratives to develop a confidence-building pedagogy to assist my students. My approach aims to enhance the existing rhetorical skills of incoming freshmen by making their abilities apparent and relevant to college writing. I believe that entering students possess valuable persuasive strategies they can learn to adapt to academic writing situations. My goal is to outline my method and demonstrate its effectiveness from my students' essays.

Academic researchers have devoted significant attention to the linguistic differences between African-American English and Standard Edited American English. Sociolinguist Geneva Smitherman, in the Preface to *talkin that talk*, laments that decades of research and scholarly work have not convinced "a large number of people" that Ebonics is spoken by "normal, intelligent people who just happen to speak a language different from that of television newscasters and bank presidents" (xi). The on-going bias toward Standard English makes linguistic differences a most significant barrier for speakers of African-American English entering college writing courses. For this reason, I think attention to grammar is especially important for students of color, who are likely to be marked socially for any non-standard usages. However, I also think focusing on the persuasive tactics used can offer bridges into the writing standards expected in college. As Mina Shaughnessy suggests in *Errors and Expectations*, there is no causal relation

between linguistic and rhetorical deficiencies (274). Shaughnessy suggests shifting attention toward development and organization, since “the student is almost certain to find his progress beyond the sentence more gratifying, for it seems to link him more directly to his recognized powers” (274). Like Shaughnessy, I recommend that composition teachers help their students bridge the transition to academia by developing the rhetorical skills students can already claim as their own.

In the following chapters I outline my theory and practice of a pedagogy for bringing out students’ personal literacies, but first I give an example of excavating my own personal literacy. In Chapter 2, I present a personal narrative that details the people I have learned and gained confidence from. This second chapter will help define, through demonstration, the experiences I see as part of the brand of narrative I believe assists my students’ writing when brought out pedagogically. Growing up in an Irish-American community in New England, I learned a rhetoric of assertion from my male role models. Physical expression through sports defined one’s identity, especially for males. Language served as a complement to the physical forcefulness one commanded. Though I enjoyed sports, my interest in literature brought me into a closer relationship with my mother, who showed me a dialogic style of communicating. Gradually, I distanced myself from the assertive male rhetoric and pursued communicative models that provided a channel for my interest in writing and literature. I realize that my lessons in language use instilled in me multiple literacies, which I have exerted some choice over by seeking the communicative patterns I felt best suited me.

Chapter 3 is an overview of the literacy narrative genre. Literacy narratives, stories that trace a character’s movement from one linguistic community into a new,

typically more empowered one, can be found in the plots and subplots of fiction and non-fiction. They also have recently become an outlet for academic scholars to articulate their ideas about literacy education and politics by describing their experiences as students and teachers of writing. Because access to and development of literacy are pressing issues these days, literacy narratives are helpful to a number of scholarly fields. Autoethnographers use literacy narratives to study broad societal issues concerning literacy practices. Typically, these studies investigate literacy outside of school and trace literacy development across generations. Teachers also use literacy narratives to study their students. In order to better understand student literacy attitudes and skills, teachers examine the students' literacy backgrounds. Writing teachers have their students read and write literacy narratives to bring issues concerning literacy to the attention of their students. Preservice teachers often study literacy narratives to make them culturally sensitive to the various literacy backgrounds of students. For gender studies, literacy narratives provide evidence for the social construction of one's gendered identity. In literary criticism, literacy narratives offer a lens of analysis to highlight the literacy influences that construct the characters. Since literacy narratives are a tool for understanding the narrator, they also play a role in therapy. In my study, literacy narratives are used to excavate my students' understanding of communication skills. They serve as self-ethnographies that shape my lessons in rhetoric and composition to connect them to my students' knowledge.

Chapter 4 analyzes one set of generic expectations in literacy narratives: the ways that literacy forces from school, community, and self-image act on characters in these stories. These competing definitions illustrate the cultural conflicts people negotiate in

becoming literate. The genre testifies to the value of cultivating one's sense of a personal literacy in reconciling the pressures of school and community.

In this chapter I analyze sixteen pieces from the literacy narrative genre to understand the forces that inhibit and motivate the narrator's movement into a new linguistic community, thereby identifying the dramatic tension of the story. Using Gallego and Hollingsworth's distinctions between school, community, and personal literacies, I examine the stories for where the tension originates. In several cases, all three literacy standards play a role in the character's literacy development.

My analysis starts with school literacy, the pressure to fit in with the institutionalized standards for communicating in school. School literacy frequently represents a social elevator that inspires characters, but it can also serve as a judge that highlights the characters' differences. Students who do not match up to the school standard often feel alienated and shut down. Alienated characters may also react against the school standard, opposing it by developing alternative identities when in school. Community literacy standards also present much tension in the stories as characters feel pressure to retain the familiar identities associated with the language used in their home environments. Community literacies are often defined in contrast to school literacy in these stories. Personal literacy standards are derived from the need to be understood from one's particular experience. One way characters in literacy narratives express this need is by asserting themselves for self-survival in oppressive circumstances. Another way is to model the literacy influences that have shaped their personal identities. And finally, some characters develop a voice for an authentic self that expresses a truth only understood by the character.

How literacy narratives relate to writing classroom pedagogies is discussed in Chapter 5. Current work in composition studies supports the value of developing community and personal language uses as a way to bring students into academic writing. And literacy narratives are recognized for their ability to help students build on the communicative approaches they already possess. However, there is room for critique of this genre as a pedagogical tool. My intention in this chapter is to provide an overview of how well literacy narratives can help students overcome cultural obstacles to writing in college.

In this chapter I use the work of Carol Witherell and Nel Noddings, among others, to cover the value of writing personal narratives to encourage students to bring their understanding of their lives into the classroom. However, I find some helpful critique of this genre from scholars like Linda Brodkey who point out the alienating effect that personal stories can have for students who feel cultural displacement in the classroom. Literacy narratives exploit the advantages of the personal narrative genre without being as intrusive. Mary Soliday finds that reading and writing literacy narratives also help students understand the issues surrounding literacy acquisition, a welcome lesson to students who are struggling with the transition into academic discourse. Literacy narratives also assist students by giving them models to follow for their own literacy development. The genre has its drawbacks, though. The narrators of published literacy narratives are successful writing professionals, and novice writers may find them difficult to identify with. Also, the stories typically track the development of the narrator's writing skills, devaluing oral communication skills, which students are likely to feel more control over.

In Chapter 6 I describe an approach to teaching college writing that cultivates students' confidence by allowing them to recognize the rhetorical strengths in the voices they already possess. Influenced by the success stories of literacy narratives, I suggest a pedagogy that mines experiences that shape one's personal language use: lessons-learned narratives. This approach has two purposes. One is to bring to light the context of one's existing skills by identifying communicative influences; the second is to get each student to consciously lay hands on the language skills she claims to be personal. Together these lessons combine for a confidence-building effect. By understanding and developing their personal voices, students can make the institutional standard part of their own. This chapter will also provide a context for the school where I have used this approach. I will discuss my students' attitudes toward essay writing by analyzing a survey I conducted with them.

The final chapter discusses the use of the pedagogy described and its effectiveness. Besides establishing comfort and confidence in students, this approach prepares them for adjusting to different academic rhetorical situations. The lessons-learned essays my students produce reveal the knowledge they possess of different rhetorical skills: pathos, imitation, maxims, ethos, dialogism, and a variety of other rhetorical skills. Examining these papers, I show how students are able to draw from and add to their personal skills as they adjust to different academic rhetorical situations.

In this dissertation I am stepping out of a traditional view of literacy as a facility with reading and writing considered a precondition for college education, though I realize the practicality of that approach. How can students learn if they cannot read and write on

the level the instructor has designed for teaching the material? Aren't certain literacy skills necessary for functioning in a college classroom?

These types of concerns resound throughout public discourse on literacy. Employers complain of a workforce ill-equipped in writing skills. Working professionals almost instinctively scoff at colleagues who commit grammatical errors. And teachers shake their heads at the dialects students bring in to their classrooms.

It is certainly true that the schooled literacy tested for in admissions and placement tests possesses great cultural value. And students who possess such skills can make teaching a smooth delivery system. I am not disputing the value of teaching schooled literacy. That is my job, after all. School training increases one's access to wider audiences and advances one's ability to be thorough and specific. And many of the errors students make in using the school standard lead to ambiguity.

For English teachers, it is tempting to view corrections on papers as the enforcing arm of a fixed standard that can be applied across all papers, all classes, all students. This perspective frames literacy as a set of personal skills that can be carried into any writing situation and measured against the official standard, making writing instruction a matter of organizing effective lessons (Resnick 28). Part of the problem with this view is the contradiction of using a fixed measure for a practice that is inherently fluid. Viewing literacy as a technical, objective skill may exclude the cultural meanings communicated. "Successful literacy must not only have the 'right' grammar," warns Gallego and Hollingsworth, "but the 'right' values, beliefs, and attitudes" (7). Cultural bias is inherent in the communicative practices of any group. Movement between standard and community dialects is much more than a mechanical skill, as Geneva Smitherman points

out: “the question of the moment is not which dialect, but which culture, not whose vocabulary but whose values, not *I am* vs. *I be*, but WHO DO I BE?” (66).

Viewing Standard English as fixed also ignores the contributions of non-standard speakers. Ethnographers of communication, like Shirley Brice Heath, recognize how different communities socialize their children into different language practices. Consequently, students arrive in the classroom with language skills that reflect “the habits and values of behaviors shared among members of that group” (Heath 11). Typically, the successful students are those whose language use is most similar to the teacher’s (Hull and Schultz 16). But teachers who appreciate the various language resources that students bring to school invite in the functions and uses of literacy from their students’ communities. The school standard does not replace one’s community literacy. Instead, it develops along with other language practices to serve the contexts in which each is used. Every student who passes English 101 develops this new literacy as part of a particular nexus of literacies that comprise the student’s background. As Gallego and Hollingsworth point out, personal, community, and school literacy practices interrelate with one another (5). Some conscientiously exert the influence of their community on their uses of Standard English, such as Geneva Smitherman who infuses her essays on language with idioms used by speakers of Black English Vernacular.

Challenging the notion of a fixed English standard also helps disabuse the cultural assumption that community literacies are practiced by inferior communicators, since they use a less effective system for making meaning. No matter how incorrect someone’s dialect may sound to a hearer who speaks a different dialect, it has validation within the complex social and cultural history that formed it. All language is equal as it functions

within the communicative system that shapes its use, but the social distinctions associated with its users create vast inequalities. The attitude that devalues non-mainstream dialects also influences the development of those dialects. As Catherine Walsh explains, “people are not passive to this domination but develop active forms of resistance and of counter knowledge production” (15). In other words, non-standard dialects are deliberately different. They reflect a valid social/cultural perspective that is a challenge to dominant interests.

In my experience, students who use non-standard dialects in class acknowledge that their language use is “wrong.” But a snicker often accompanies the “my bad,” with subversive smiles and glances all around. There is a tension between standard and non-standard dialects. As Mike Rose concludes from his experience, “To understand the nature and development of literacy we need to consider the social context in which [the writing] occurs--the political, economic, and cultural forces that encourage or inhibit it” (237). Anthony Fox draws a similar conclusion from his study of teaching African American students: “[S]chools have failed to integrate literacy instruction with the experience and history of African Americans” (105).

Those who do not possess the qualifying level of school literacy because their backgrounds have promoted a different dialect feel compelled, even willing to pay, to learn a standard dialect that devalues their own. This irony sets up the student for a conflicted learning experience, allegiance to one’s community or to one’s ambition to rise into successes outside of one’s community.

A feeling of separate allegiances is especially likely for students of color. In particular, African-Americans have had their history of writings omitted from the literary

canon for years. And as Anthony Fox points out, "The emphasis on discrete grammatical features of black English has diverted attention from more serious issues, among them the separation of literacy instruction in school from the literary history of African Americans" (105). Currently, African-American college students drop out 20% more often than their white counterparts (Porter 12). The tyranny of Standard Edited American English is likely contributing to this frustration. It seems the division between life outside of school and life inside can persist with costly results for some African Americans.

I suggest using a wider meaning for literacy to bring together often-opposing literacy forces by accounting for communicative skills acquired through non-standard language practices. Though writing the college way may appear completely different from talking with friends back home, some of the underlying skills might be surprisingly similar. What's more, the use of the language one has mastered in other rhetorical situations, when adapted to school, might communicate powerfully within an essay genre. I suggest looking at literacy as something beyond the specific functions of the classroom, but instead as one's ability to meet the communicative demands of one's social environment. As Deborah Brandt puts it in *Literacy as Involvement*, "literacy [is] not the narrow ability to deal with texts but the broad ability to deal with other people as a writer or a reader" (14). Like Brandt, I believe being literate is not defined through reading and writing skills, but through how one functions in a culture as a reader and writer. As a result, my use of the term literacy includes both written and spoken language. The mark of literate success is functioning within a social group in a way that earns one a commensurate status. Also borrowing from Brandt, I see literacy as a resource that

allows one participation in a literate culture “for the opportunities and protections that it potentially grants its seekers” (*Literacy in American Lives* 5). My assumption is that literate competency, both linguistic and rhetorical, would be demonstrated in written and/or spoken forms as social demands dictate. Since writing depends upon the primary system of oral language, as Walter Ong points out, I too believe that “in all the wonderful worlds that writing opens, the spoken word still resides and lives” (8).² This definition of literacy also builds on the work of Robert Pattison and Valerie Smith. Pattison criticizes Western notions of literacy as biased toward Anglo-American uses of language, disregarding the sophistication of orality. Smith’s work points out a link between orality and power through examples in slave narratives (4): “The narrators master their subject by imposing narrative order upon it; this privilege results from the ability to manipulate language whether orally or in writing” (5). In this way, literacy is about exerting oneself effectively into a social sphere. As Deborah Brandt explains it, literacy is about participating in cultural and economic life on one’s own terms (*Encyclopedia* 393).

For the purposes of the pedagogy presented here, conflating written and spoken into literacy helps to highlight the common goal inherent in language use—participation in a group that provides one the same access to resources other members enjoy. Putting speaking on a par with writing defuses the predisposition that favors written language, hopefully allowing students to see their orality as part of the make-up of skills needed to succeed as college writers.

² Sociolinguist James Paul Gee identifies primary discourse as oral discourse in a person’s native language, a process not requiring education. Secondary discourse, he claims, are found outside of the home, in schools, workplaces, and in government institutions. Gee defines literacy as “control of secondary uses of language” (8).

Chapter 2: A self-study of personal literacies

It's the first day of the fall semester, 1994. Five minutes until my first class ever as a full-time instructor. Everywhere the halls are filled with unfamiliar faces, colleagues mispronouncing my name. Everything's about to start and I'm still in the bathroom looking at myself, the me about to assume this new role. My stomach feels funny. Take a deep breath. Perhaps some more water. Is this really the job for me? I give myself a solid stare. Is this someone they will think of as their teacher? Someone who can strike a rapport with forty students at once, deliver the material clearly, be engaging, move with the particular dynamics of this unknown group? I recall my days as a graduate assistant. They listened to that man. I must have it in me. And I have known lots of teachers. What they sound like, imagined their thoughts. Especially my father, standing in front of a class: the steady cadence of his voice, the declarative statements, the watchful response. Yes, I can do that. Concentrate on what you know, I told myself.

Nine years later, I don't need that little pep talk to fix the image of myself in order to address a new group of students. I walk straight in there without thinking; the role has become a part of me. My memory of myself as a teacher nearly ongoing, incorporated into my identity. The language of the classroom is ready in my mouth, part of my personal expression.

I can see the evolution of my teacher voice much the way I see my students learning to fit into college, to sound "academic." The shift is not usually smooth. For some, this process is so shaky that it becomes impossible to stay in college and remake one's student-self satisfactorily, perhaps falling short of one's expectations of a college student or unable to carry into the classroom the confidence enjoyed before college.

Developing an acceptable academic voice is a process that needs some support. As I look back upon how my use of language has developed, I can see the people who gave me comfort and built my confidence. Recognizing how I have overcome obstacles reveals multiple sources for the language that has become personal to me. I also realize who and what I have relied on to learn new ways of expressing myself. This process helps my confidence for taking on new situations by making me conscious of the skills I have available and my history for adapting these skills anew—a process I believe students must undergo to succeed. And if brought to their attention, students can see their strengths and adaptability more easily.

In this essay I trace the development of my communicative skills to demonstrate the different rhetorical influences that comprise my personal voices. The evolution of my rhetorical skills through these life models reads as a type of literacy narrative. I present my story as an example of the material composition teachers could bring out of their students to help them recognize their agency in developing rhetorical skills.

I didn't speak or write the way I do now even ten years ago. Perhaps that is true for anyone. New ways of communicating unavoidably get into our ears. But I wonder how one builds on a current repertoire of voices to acquire new ones. What influences are more dominant: one's current exposures or the formative models of one's young life? How am I, as an adult, still influenced by earlier communicative models? Questioning how my voice develops makes me interested in how younger versions of myself developed voice. The inquiry sends me back to the culture of my childhood and the people who were my main influences: my mother, father, and oldest brother.

Being the youngest of five siblings, I received special attention from my oldest brother, Matt. As the oldest (seven years my senior), he naturally found favor with our father, especially since they shared a common interest: an obsession with sports. Ice hockey was the popular sport where we lived. And at a young age my brother became widely known for his talent. His skill, in fact, shaped an image of him as a local star: a boy who had mastered the world of the ice. This is the figure that became one of my first communicative models.

Matt was thrilled to have a little brother admiring his success. By the time Matt was distinguishing himself on the ice, I was just learning how to skate. Predictably, I wanted to become him. But he also wanted me to become him. As a result, our relationship became extremely close. Everything Matt did and said I followed precisely. I think we both began to believe that we were sharing a common life. When referring to other players, he would often describe them as not being as good as us. And I, of course, wanted to believe that his status applied to me.

Our way of relating fit closely to a player-coach model. It seemed as though I was constantly receiving advice on how to play hockey. His comments were confident and absolute. "The way you handle a situation when..." was a typical introduction to one of his lessons. But these were not just technique tips. Matt would use the same declarative statements to sum up one's attitude on the ice. And his philosophies were applicable to all other venues of life: home, school, and neighborhood. My live-in coach was able to remind me at all times of how to "be tough but not an asshole," "you don't have to say a word if you show them what you can do," and "have a good time with it."

Modeling Matt's speech also required following his actions. The way he spoke matched the role he assumed on the ice. He was the one who stood out, so whatever he had to say was heard as authoritative. Simple instructions like "I'm open" or "pass it here" take on leadership value when the other players comply. Matt's actions were almost always the basis for his words. Being a fast skater, he could tell another player to "just turn on the jets--get past that guy." I also heard him give the advice, "let'em know you're there--don't let'em forget you're there," punctuated with the poke of his stick.

Off the ice he demonstrated the same decisive certainty. Every situation had an obvious resolution to him. And his solutions were always demonstrated in his own manner. Having fun is what matters most in his life. For instance, after a tense family occasion that brought my mother to tears, Matt said to me afterward, "good food, anyway." He also holds as a guiding principle that one should always be "cool," doing things that contribute to one's popularity. Once when I was on my way to visit a friend who was unathletic and interested in electronics, Matt told me, "why don't you go see who's down at the rink--see if you can sneak on." He gave his instructions with a shrugging, matter of fact tone--as though he were pointing out the only sensible alternative. The force of his rhetoric relied on this close link to his actions. It is hard to argue with someone whose advice is a verbal description of his life--a life that is elevated for its achievements by surrounding observers.

I tried to imitate Matt's absolute self-assurance in action and speech. In particular, I recall adopting his aphoristic style as a child. Among friends, especially when playing sports, I often found myself giving brief, sweeping directions: "keep your head up; look what's around you." Or, "just hit the ball; don't worry about where." I realized the

control afforded by such summary statements. I could see why they brought Matt confidence and helped maintain his high status. As long as I could act out the meaning of the words, these terse conclusive comments closed off the subject and left my word as the final point. I learned that a position of power can be confirmed through the certainty of one's assertions.

This method of communicating, I realized, was also the way to interact with my brother. Since it is difficult to add to someone who is delivering a final word, our relating was mostly my listening to him. But, at times, he tested out my judgments and heard what I had to say concerning the people or events particular to my life. I found that this objective style best suited critical, even cynical observations. For instance, I can remember capturing my brother's attention with the reasons I didn't like a "wussy" at school. I also recall him listening to how "flaky" I thought a girl was who had painted flowers on her face. But the form of our communicating rarely developed into back and forth conversation. And the range of topics which held his interest was very limited.

More and more, I found this style of communicating insufficient for most of my relationships. My interests were not solely centered on sports. I became exposed to more intellectual pursuits through my mother. My mother did not seem to fit into the male culture of our family. She was a weaver and painter, and she valued genuine expression over physical triumph. My mother offered me an entirely different model for relating.

For my mother, communication brought an exchange between parties processing an issue, not a challenge to one's position of power. I admired the way she talked to people. I recall being impressed by her lengthy conversations with friends and relatives.

They seemed to enjoy talking. They laughed and took turns shifting the topic. It appealed to me that language could bring intimacy with others.

When my mother spoke she did not merely state her views; she presented her thoughts as an attempt to formulate her understanding and also to initiate response. Her thinking often seemed unclear until she had finished speaking. And her mind could easily change once she heard the views of her audience. But I remember listening intensely to her emerging comments. She provided insights I found interesting and valuable. During one dinner conversation about the importance of following school policies, she brought up the point that the teachers who police the rules are more confined by them than the students. The teachers live by them year after year, limiting their view of the world. Her comments deflated my father's grandstanding on the value of these policies. I prized her quiet power to gently shift the audience's flow of thinking; unassumingly, she took on the weighty role of sage.

Her humor also came out as little flashes of insight. She would usually insert a comment while someone else was talking, as when my brother Matt recounted to the family the outcome of one of his games. One time, after he had lost and told of his coach's pep talk after the game while consuming refreshments, my mother said, "So, you lost the game, but you won the tea." She could regularly be counted on for a different, less macho way to see the issue.

I found my own conversations with my mother especially fulfilling. In her presence I felt no pressure to have a position or pre-formulated response to the subject. I could develop ideas as they occurred. I felt uninhibited by topics and encouraged to think elaborately. While I was still in grade school, we discussed adult issues, such as what

happens when one dies or our doubts concerning Christian faith. We analyzed the relationships around us. I was quite impressed by her advice on the issues in my life. One time, while discussing the difficulty I was having with a friend who compulsively lied, she told me he was probably just insecure because no one listened to him. He didn't believe that the truth would interest me. Gradually we came to the conclusion together that I shouldn't worry about whether he was telling the truth; he'd eventually tell me the truth once he believed I was listening. My mother's comments had enormous influence on how I conducted myself. But her advice rarely felt didactic. It emerged through a mutual exchange.

I felt comfortable with my voice in her presence. I believed that my insights could likewise influence her. I remember her being touched by my observation concerning my unathletic brother who suffered from chronic low self-esteem. I told her that everybody finds a scapegoat in him because he is sure to fail doing things he doesn't think he can do. He needs to stop trying to play sports if he wants to feel good about himself, I said. She agreed with me and tried to encourage him into other interests. With her I believed my words had value.

I tried to customize my relationships to the way my mother and I communicated. I began to listen to others as she did to me, allowing my own thoughts to develop within the spontaneity of the exchange. This sensitivity was not entirely practical in the world of our family, though. My father's confrontational machismo set the tone. Being able to talk to my mother did not seem to help me develop a way of relating to my brothers or my father. My mother's voice did not carry as much weight with the other male figures

in my family. She could not project to a group as could my father--the voice that became synonymous with our family's identity.

My dominant memories of relating to my brother focus on his instructions to me; this is also the case with my father. When I was growing up, my father embodied authority. He instilled fear in all his children as he boomed commands from his football-player frame. My father made his living as a history teacher and football coach. He was accustomed to having final judgment in matters. Being in charge seemed to be the role he carried into all situations.

My father portrayed our family as he envisioned himself: tough, competitive, confident. In one short speech he gave to a large school gathering he described our family. He concluded saying, "We may not be able to waltz, but if you put us on ice-- watch out!" The image he broadcasted and my two oldest brothers exemplified carried widely through the community. Specific expectations came with being a "Corkery." Though I found comfort in the special recognition of my name, the description didn't seem to fit me. It seemed as though people were imagining my brothers when relating to me. I often felt forced to imitate my brothers to fit in, to adopt a set of behaviors that could win my father's approbation.

I do not recall especially wanting to be like my father, though. His authoritative position made his life seem out of reach to me. However, I do remember desiring his ability to speak before groups of people. I witnessed his aggressive, assured speech applied to retelling stories, making toasts, giving history lessons, and, later on, addressing the student body once he became a principal. He managed to hold even large audiences with the same emphatic confidence I heard in my brother Matt. Sometimes I felt that his

grip on the audience was maintained through intimidation. He was often on the edge of getting mad up there, it seemed, so people listened with a mixture of curiosity and fear. It was the confidence I admired.

For my father, maintaining control seemed to be the primary goal of speaking. As long as people were listening to him, he stayed in charge. I remember many times being sure he made up or exaggerated his stories to keep his audience. One time, when I was about seven, I decided to challenge him. At a party he retold a story I had heard him describe the day it occurred. While fishing one day, he said, a friend had taken out his dentures and put them on top of a post on the dock when a sea gull swooped down and took them away. But I remembered that the dentures had fallen into the water where sea gulls were floating, and they had anxiously descended on the false teeth. Why had he changed it? I noticed a shift in his tone as he switched endings. His voice became more emphatic, his laughter especially pronounced. He wanted to make more of an impression. He seemed to want to increase the partygoers' attention to him. And given the resounding laughter that followed, he succeeded. The husband of the host family shouted to his wife in the kitchen: "You just missed one of Corkery's stories." She came rushing in: "Oh, I love Chris's stories."

Afterward, I told my dad I remembered the dentures only falling into the water. He said he didn't think he remembered it that way, but it didn't matter anyway--"It's a good story." The lesson was clear: language used strategically can put you on top. It wasn't what he said that was important, it was whether he satisfied his audience. As long as they were attentive to the story, they were focused on him--not just a story, Corkery's

story. He was not delivering content; he was confirming his status as one who is worth listening to.

Manipulating tone and volume was another rhetorical strategy I saw him use to maintain standing. He frequently inflected his voice to show that his views were on the side of right-minded, common sense. His tone and volume would increase as though no other position could be plausible. On one occasion when he was discussing some students who were caught drinking during the school day, he was outraged. "How could anyone be so stupid? Drinking during the school day? Why would anyone do such a thing?" On the other hand, another student who was thrown in jail by the police for driving under the influence of alcohol made him mad at the police: "He's a kid for Christ's sake. What do 18 year olds do? What the hell do they think they're doing? Catching a criminal?" It often seemed to me that his positions were inconsistent, but what was consistent was his emphatic response. He always claimed he knew which side was right, and his tone let you know he was not going to back down. His position seemed arbitrary, conveying to me that the way one communicates is more important than the content. The position does not matter as long as the assertion is made with conviction.

Communicating with my father did not seem to help me reach the confidence he displayed and I desired. Usually I found speaking to him quite difficult. Since he was in the habit of providing forceful instruction to groups, his thunderous tones could make a lone boy quiver. I can recall many instances of being in his company and wondering if I should brace myself for something I did or said. Fearing his reactions made me quite apprehensive when addressing him. I knew he would be reluctant to relinquish any

power and listen to me, and it seemed impossible to argue with him. On the other hand, he was not forthcoming in my presence either. When not in a leadership role, he was usually silent. This put me regularly in the position of attempting to relate by initiating conversation--something I approached with great trepidation. As a young teen, I remember a long silence during a car ride (one of many) which I interrupted by asking how he could avoid daydreaming while driving. I didn't understand how one could look out the windshield for so much time without losing concentration. His reply: "Well, maybe you shouldn't learn how to drive if you can't concentrate." During another long silence while walking I asked him if he ever tried to retrace his thoughts to figure out how he arrived at some notion. "That sounds incredibly boring," was his reply, again suggesting little interest in understanding my point of view. Experiences like these led me to stay silent around my father most of the time. My confidence was diminished beside him; my voice undeveloped and insecure.

When our family gathered, the conversation usually consisted of sports talk between Matt and Dad. I recall being very nervous even in this setting. I did not know what to say on the topics, and I hadn't their confidence either. When the conversation turned toward me or when I had something to say, I became very anxious, composing the words in my mind. As an audience, my father and oldest brother expected conclusive statements--a position or attitude expressed with resolve. I rarely felt that I had arrived at any judgments on the subject at hand, so I recall forcing them. One acceptable contribution was to make fun of the topic. And with ice hockey nearly always present in the family air, my mediocre performance on the rink was quite conspicuous. So regularly did I make fun of my abilities that my hockey-playing became a family joke: "If I ever

decided to shoot the puck, maybe I could score," or, "I like to give the other team a fair chance--a more than fair chance." Quips like these got me through many dinner conversations. However, this wasn't the way I felt. I resented the pressure on me to succeed in hockey. I felt that my individual interests were not valued by my dad or my brothers.

Developing my voice to be understandable to my father became a central struggle of adolescence. I recall enormous frustration trying to express my feelings to him. On issues of importance to me, the words came out haltingly. There was no natural way for my strongest feelings to come out, it seemed. During one of these intense moments, my father said, "you chew on your words too much." Other times he accused me of not making sense. I recall in some instances that I ended up crying instead of being able to explain the way I felt. The other alternative was to betray myself again with a light-hearted comment to resolve the issue. It was during this period that I began to write.

Writing poetry helped me develop the feelings I had such difficulty vocalizing to audiences like my father. I felt liberated by the patient, non-judging page. I could explore topics of my choosing, taking my time to find the words that suited me. The confident voice I felt with my mother I could put onto the page. I remember thinking as I was writing, I wonder what my mom would think of this. And when I did show her, she was always encouraging, providing me a way to express my otherwise unformed voice in the family. I wrote many poems describing my place in the family, repositioning myself with my voice. For example, I wrote about how I was being shaped by the training I received from my oldest brother:

Bantam League

My brother's jacket reads: Tim
West. Mass. Div. II Champs,
Blue Jays 17, on the shoulder.
He flies across the ice.
He leans the number part into me
when we skate, tells me to lean
back, stiffen my arm, relax
the hands.

I wear the jacket
at his games, spread my
shoulders inside, pace the boards
like I'm being kept from the ice,
lunge at the screen, shake
its chain links. Everyone
in the stands behind me, my mother
flapping her blue and white sleeves.

I walk around between periods
reading other people's chests,
shoulders. They read me back,
check my face. I go for hot
chocolate, nod to the girl,
pocket my hands, bring them out
on the counter, lean,
put one back,
practiced.

I also found voice for emotions that were more critical of my frustration with communicating within the family. My mother was even supportive of these harsh expressions of our family. Showing such poems to my mother made me feel as if I were responding to my father's communicative methods, even though I never showed them to him. In this example, I try to capture my desperate need for an expressive outlet when subjected to his authoritative approach:

Sit Down Meals

I stand at the entrance to the dining room.
My father turns from the table,
gathers his bills and papers.
We are five, he says
and turns back, as if
confirming reservations,
holding up his hand,
exploding his fingers on the word
five.

During grace I look at the window
across the room. We are all in it,
reversed, floating
in our same positions,
the silence
drifting us out the backyard.

My brother holds his fork like a tool,
starts his way through the food,
filling his mouth with huge scoops
as if there is too much
and he must get through it.
We all watch from our plates,
forks in mid-air.
Slow down, he's commanded.
We each swallow.
You'll get sick, says my mother.
He doesn't look back.
String beans longer than his fingers.
Potatoes the size of his fist.
He piles them in together
tunneling toward some passage.

I found my family relationships to be a rich source for writing, because so much of our communication was physical. I didn't want to be limited by what they assumed our relationships to mean. I wanted to articulate my role to define myself within the family—even though I showed my poems only to my mother. I wrote several poems about

each member of my family. Here is one I wrote about the interactive nature of my relationship with my mother:

Homemade

Into the living room
rushes my mother,
around the coffee table,
as if jogging in place.
She drips chicken broth
on the paper
stops me from reading
sticks the spoon in my mouth.

I follow her
back to the kitchen
unfolding the last page.
She fills the bowls
brings them
one at a time
pressed between her palms.
I lean my face into
its steam, the tiny orbits
of carrot, speckles of rice.
The spoon warms in my hand.

I read her the weather
from the markings on the map:
colder, snow maybe.
She just sits there
stirring up the elements,
holding out her spoon
before each sip
as high as her chin
as if taking readings.

The intimate communication I had with my mother built in me a voice I could rely on for writing as a student as well. I felt I could reach many of my teachers successfully on the page. And it gave me confidence that they were listening to what I

had to say. However, I found myself reluctant to speak out in class. I was afraid I wouldn't be understood; composing my thoughts before a group exacerbated the fear that I might be seen as out of control.

It amazed me how teachers could speak to a class for long periods, developing complex thoughts extemporaneously. I remember in particular watching my seventh grade English teacher with awe. He presented what I thought were profound insights about life from the literature we read. His analysis seemed to flow freely from the text, yet his observations were all consistent, fully developing his interpretation. I couldn't believe he was coming up with all this as we were sitting there. It seemed as though he was arriving at these thoughts right then, explaining himself as each insight arrived. I watched, thinking, I wish I could do that.

Several of my teachers in junior and senior high made a strong impression on me. I typically paid close attention in class and worked hard to get their eye in return. It was not difficult to get noticed since my father was their principal, and gradually they regarded me as a promising student. My father began to share the confidence in me expressed by my mother and his colleagues. My identity was becoming more solid. I was more academic than athletic. He could live with that.

I had a harder time reconciling my more introverted, academic self with my brothers, especially Matt. I couldn't break out of the way I was accustomed to relating to him. I recall one time he visited home while I was in high school. When he asked me about school, I defaulted to what I perceived to be his way of communicating. I told him how easy it was to get over on some of my teachers, how stupid some of the requirements--how much I was in control of my world. This is not the way I felt about

school. But I could not find the voice to make him understand how learning different subjects was helping me become more confident in expressing myself. I had become practiced at sounding like him: in control enough to turn all situations into fun, easy living.

I didn't always maintain my allegiance to the family machismo. I often opted for my mother's intensity and depth around my brothers at great risk. At times I believe I deliberately altered my responses to provoke the deeper thinking I experienced with my mother. I recall an instance when one of my brothers was talking about meeting a friend he hadn't seen in four years. He described the work they were doing when they had last seen each other and the good times they had partying together. My response to their meeting was that it would be "fascinating to see each other again." There was a silence after I said this. "Fascinating. It will be fascinating," mocked one of my brothers. I knew I was asking for that response; their meeting wasn't going to be fascinating. But I couldn't resist. I thought I was stirring them up. It was an amateur attempt at introducing a more profound level to the conversation.

My continued interest in education spoke loudly for the role model I chose to follow. On several occasions upon returning from college Matt was astounded by my decision to study literature. "What are they doing to you there?" he asked--"They turning you into a fairy?" I could laugh off such comments by then. But even my father tended toward ridicule: "Never thought I'd see the name 'Corkery' on a literary journal. In a program maybe. But not for poetry." Publishing poems was not a goal they could identify with. My mother, on the other hand, was quite invested in my interest in literature.

Studying writing and literature gave me confidence in my ability to communicate, but not to a live group. I found the idea of teaching appealing, but I thought perhaps it didn't suit me. I should be a journalist or researcher I thought. During my time in college, though, I met Jim Daniels, a poet just beginning his teaching career. He was extremely uncomfortable in the classroom. I watched him mumble to the floor and kick the walls as he tried to talk to us. But as I listened, his comments were provocative. He articulated the value of poetry and the intriguing process of writing. I came to realize that he enjoyed telling us about poetry. The initial discomfort of addressing a group was outweighed by the satisfaction of reaching us.

Jim became my mentor while in college. I took several of his courses and selected him as my advisor. I admired the way he could be a leader without relying on the rhetoric of authority I observed in my father. He did not elevate himself through his role; in fact, he felt equal enough to his students to be sensitive to their reaction to him. His leadership was demonstrated to me from his confidence in his ideas. The content of what he had to say was more important than the vulnerabilities he exposed while saying it. I found it relieving to see that one did not need to assume an authoritative persona to be persuasive.

Observing Jim made me realize that perseverance can be a method for developing one's voice. He strained to get his ideas out no matter what fears the audience presented. I remember sitting near him at a seminar crowded with many faculty and students. A question-answer period followed the guest presentation. I saw Jim becoming very uncomfortable: moving around anxiously on his seat, pushing his hands in his pockets, pulling them out, sitting on them. After a few minutes of this uneasiness, his hand went

up in the air. With difficulty he got his question out. Everyone understood him, though. No harsh judgments descended. He just stuck to what he had to say. My hero.

Much of my confidence to try teaching was drawn from Jim's model. If he could do it, so could I. I did stammer and avoid eye contact my first several lessons as a graduate assistant. However, I recall achieving an especially productive intimacy with those first groups I taught. After teaching for several years, I don't find myself thinking of Jim very often anymore. Instead I focus on my interest in the material and how I have successfully presented it in the past. However, thanks to Jim, part of my current confidence comes from a belief that public speaking anxiety can help me connect with an audience by demonstrating no presumption of status above them.

It would seem that I have been able to select a new role model to replace or correct the earlier influence of my father. Though my inherited role model powerfully shaped my ability to communicate, it was not a fait accompli. Being away from my father's influence and consciously seeking out Jim's, I found a basis for communicative approaches I felt comfortable with. I think that all of the speech patterns I learned from my role models are indelible. But I believe I have exercised some control over them by trying to identify who I am modeling. Recognizing whose language I might be following has helped me realize that other models are available. Such awareness has enabled me some choice among the rhetorics I have learned to imitate.

I believe in this potential to use role models as communicative tools from my own experience. During my first semester of graduate school I took a course on the theories of teaching college composition. It was intended to prepare me for teaching freshman composition as part of my graduate assistantship. One of the first assignments was to

present a 30-minute lesson to the class. This made me very anxious. I hadn't yet started teaching; and my first attempt at this role was to this sophisticated audience of my peers and instructor.

The day of my presentation I was very nervous. I went over my notes again and again, right up until my turn. During the lesson I felt uncomfortable, but I stuck to my notes and everyone seemed to be following me. Afterward I felt good about my performance, but a fellow classmate's reaction stunned me. He told me how alarmed he was by my aggressive tone. He hadn't expected that, given my friendly demeanor in class: "What happened to you up there? This nice guy suddenly gets up in front of a class and look out!" He said he was afraid for my students, having a sergeant for a teacher. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I had not noticed such a tone. I immediately knew where it came from, but I had never realized that I had internalized my father's voice. During all those years of fearing his words, I was actually learning that pattern of speech. I began to see my father's technique in a new light. It occurred to me that his style might be borne out of anxiety as well. Being aggressive and commanding might be a mechanism for defending against appearing out of place in a leadership role. Realizing whose behavior I was modeling made me know I didn't want to follow that example. I then decided to apply the Jim Daniels style when I got before my first classes. I must admit, though, that an authoritative tone is useful for a teacher. And upon occasion in class I have summoned up my version of my father when such a method for my message was helpful.

Other times I have also accessed voices I developed from earlier role models. In particular, my brother Matt provided me with a style of expression useful in certain

situations. I frequently encounter men who communicate similarly to Matt: brief declarative statements that encapsulate one's reaction to a subject. I feel this type of speech is part of me and I can fit into the conversation--at a party or a bar, talking with students or even colleagues. Imitating the rhetoric I learned from Matt has helped me provide a channel to reach these audiences.

Thinking back on these models makes me realize how exposures to different styles of communicating mirror the development of my identity through different voices. Many of these personas seem unavoidably inherited from my environment: seeing myself as a "Corkery" jock or a Matthew Corkery want-to-be, for instance. But within the models given to me at birth, I seem to have been able to make some choices among them. My current style is much closer to my mother's than to that of any other family member. But I feel that all of my communicative models inhabit the voices I possess. And some of these influences are consciously selected. I can hear the voices of influential teachers in the way I express myself now in that role. Not only can new models teach me new ways of communicating, but also knowledge of whom I am following has the potential for enhancing the skills I possess. I believe this kind of self-awareness can assist students in confirming their abilities to adapt to different communicative situations and bring to their consciousness the availability of different communicative models.

Investigating one's role models is like breaking open the self. And analyzing one's language is like picking apart one's soul. But after having laid myself out, I feel more knowledgeable about who I am. The constituent parts of my voice show me how I have evolved to be multi-literate. It is comforting to trace my use of language to the

world in which I grew up. These are the relationships that brought me to where I am. My identity is solid with their network around me. But this knowledge also gives me ways to change further, since awareness of these influences helps me reshape the voices I use. Analyzing the sources of my communicative influences brings to me a confidence I believe practically any student could benefit from.

Chapter 3: Overview of Literacy Narrative Genre

Narrative and literacy intersect in a number of interesting ways. For instance, interactions surrounding a text are ruled-governed “literacy events,” according to Shirley Brice Heath: “Literacy events have social interactional rules which regulate the type and amount of talk about what is written, and define ways in which oral language reinforces, denies, extends, or sets aside the written material” (386). Literacy moves through our interactions with unsuspecting predictability. Cultural attitudes toward literacy, so ingrained, dictate the way it is discussed.

Inveterate beliefs about literacy come out in storytelling, where a character’s level of literacy is part of an author’s construction of a story. Why is a character assigned a certain literacy level? How does a character relate within and across categories of literacy? What leads a character to achieve or fail at acquiring a new literacy status? These questions offer many probes for societal critique.

A similar approach can be used for narrators (in fiction and non-fiction), who construct understanding out of particular circumstance, as Paul Kerby argues in *Narrative and Self*: “The stories we tell are part of our becoming, . . . a mode of vision, plotting what is good and what is bad for us, what is possible and what is not—plotting who we may become” (54). Bernard Duyfhuizen, in *Narratives of Transmission*, reminds us that Narratology “commonly distinguishes between the characters experience and a narrator’s tale of those events” (16). But the nature of reporting on experience brings character and narrator together by revealing, as Richard Hopkins explains in *Narrative Schooling*, “who and what we are now and are becoming, as we live and employ our lives through the narrative ordering of experience” (38).

For widely different reasons, stories that foreground language acquisition are drawing increasing scholarly interest. Over the past two decades, researchers in linguistic anthropology, literary criticism, rhetoric and composition, teacher training, and gender studies have all found uses for studying narratives of literacy development. In this chapter, I examine these diverse interests in the genre I refer to as literacy narratives. My intention is to provide an overview of how literacy narratives have been used to advance these areas of study and how these uses inform my research in this genre.

Definition of Terms

A number of terms surround the general practice of writing about one's experience with literacy. Though many appear to be synonyms helpful for avoiding redundancy, distinctions are worth noting, especially given the different disciplinary contexts in which the terms are used.

It is important to recognize these terms as ways to define texts but not necessarily to distinguish between texts. For example, a work could be read as a narrative of socialization on one hand, then as a literacy narrative on the other.

Narratives of socialization

Janet Carey Eldred and Peter Mortensen use “narratives of socialization” for coming-of-age stories that depict characters moving into new social arenas. When a character's social movement involves navigating a new discursive world as well, such stories “often contain detailed and insightful investigations of how language is acquired and how it creates particular regional and private identities” (513).

Literature of the Contact Zone

Acknowledging Mary Louise Pratt, Eldred and Mortensen define “literature of the contact zone” as “fiction authored in colonial contexts or of colonial histories. It studies the particular problems of forcing a sanctioned literature on colonized subjects and examines, among other things, the role of ‘autoethnography’ in resisting legislated representations” (513). As a site where differences in power make contact between groups, the zone invites analysis of the differences. According to Pratt, when literatures are examined, the subordinate group can critique the influences on their literacy practices that come from the dominant group (36).

Literacy Biography, Literacy Ethnography, Literacy History

The terms “literacy biography, literacy ethnography, and literacy history” are applied by researchers to probe the social and cultural contexts through which literacy emerges. In gathering literacy ethnographies for her study, Shirley Brice Heath sought “detailed descriptions of what actually happens to children as they learn to use language and form their values about its structures and functions [that] tell us what children do to become and remain acceptable members of their own communities” (8). Or, as Brandt suggests in “Remembering Writing, Remembering Reading,” literacy histories should attend to the ways that reading and writing actually enter people’s lives (460). Such life history research is well established in the social sciences and has gained currency in education research (see Galindo). Characteristic of these accounts is their reliance on the objectivity of the researcher/writer. As records of other people’s literacy experiences, literacy biographies must be judged, as Heath puts it, according to “each reader’s

conception of science and valuation of long-term participation and observation in accounting for the ways of life of particular groups of people” (9). Any of these terms could be applied to Chapter 2 of this study.

Literacy Autobiography, Literacy Autoethnography, Personal Literacy History

These terms refer to an individual’s account of his or her experiences with literacy development. Like ethnographers, these authors put the research lens upon themselves and probe their past for the forces that have fostered and inhibited their language abilities. This emphasis on context directs the writer to recall relevant influences from role models, educators, family members, and peers, and to describe germane literacy activities in his or her homes, schools, places of worship, and community centers.

Literacy Narrative, Literacy Story

“Literacy narrative” and “literacy story” apply to any account of literacy experiences. This broader definition allows for any perspective on tracing someone’s language development: observational, personal, or fictional. Some composition teachers, like J. Blake Scott, prefer to use the term “literacy narrative” precisely because it blurs the fictional and nonfictional elements of his students’ stories, “in order to highlight the constructedness of the students’ accounts” (109). There is creativity implied in the terms “narrative” and “story” that allow for the writers to dispense with the pressure to tell “what happened.” Howard Tinberg believes this is important for student writers, who, instead, should tell their stories to discover their “archeology” (287). Tinberg claims that literacy narratives help students with their need “to theorize their lives” (287).

The terms “narrative” and “story” suggest room for analysis and interpretation, as well. Reading a text for its development as a literacy narrative offers a unique lens, as scholars such as Janet Carey Eldred and Peter Mortensen have discovered.

Literacy Narrative and Popular Trends

The recent proliferation of interest in narratives about literacy development mirrors a larger trend in the study of narrative. In recent decades, unheard voices have found a welcome channel in personal narratives. According to teacher/scholar Nancy Miller, the 1990s brought a “renewed urgency to add the story of our lives to the public record” (982). As Maxine Greene puts it in her 1991 forward to *Stories Lives Tell: Narrative and Dialogue in Education*, “persons, long inarticulate, are overcoming the silences by thinking and speaking in terms of story” (ix).

Just as the multiplicity of stories reflects a multiplicity of perspectives, the way we tell our stories reveals who we are. The connection between story and identity has also fueled interest in the personal narrative genre. Philosopher Paul Ricour proclaims in an epigraph to his 1985 “History as Narrative and Practice,” “Our own existence cannot be separated from the account we can give of ourselves. It is in telling our own stories that we give ourselves an identity” (214). Personal narratives provide us a text for theorizing about our lives.

Educators have turned the identity asserting/forming nature of storytelling into epistemology. If we understand ourselves through our personal stories, we might further our knowledge by attending to our narratives. “To narrate is to know” (xv), as Joseph Trimmer puts it. In his challenge to reform traditional education with narrative

schooling, Richard Hopkins claims, “The idea of narrative might provide a cohesive, even protogenic, operating principle for tying lived experience to subject matter in the schools” (xvi).

Academics who theorize the use of personal writing, like Nancy Miller, are also “entangled in the currents of a wider movement” toward autobiography (981). Likewise, interest in literacy narratives has risen with the larger tide.

The Primary Genre

Outside of academic scholars, few authors write with their main focus on language acquisition. However, this seemingly pedantic topic has made it to mainstream audiences. George Bernard Shaw’s 1916 play *Pygmalion* is about the social and cultural transformation of a street flower merchant who is taught to speak like a duchess. When the main character, Eliza Doolittle, successfully masquerades as a lady at a ball, she becomes conflicted about her new identity, dramatized by sticking her tongue out at herself. By the end of the play she rejects the efforts of her teacher, Henry Higgins, to direct her future and she marries a young aristocrat. Shaw’s play was adapted into the musical *My Fair Lady* in 1956. Often viewed as another update to Shaw’s story is William Russell’s 1980 play *Educating Rita*, later made into a film, about a hairdresser who decides to improve her life by enrolling in an Open University. At first seduced by the language that elevates academics, she eventually sees through the façade and uses her academic literacy to assume new control of her life. Another popular literacy story from the mid 1930s by Leonard Q. Ross tells amusing stories of a spirited immigrant studying English in an adult literacy program in *The Education of Hyman Kaplan*, published

serially in *The New Yorker*. Also, William Gibson's 1957 play of how Anne Sullivan taught the blind and deaf Helen Keller to communicate in *The Miracle Worker* was a Broadway success that was made into a film.

It is more common to see literacy narratives as threads within larger stories, especially autobiographies. Issues of literacy development play out as subplots in many familiar works. For instance, Frederick Douglass learned how to read and write as part of his escape from slavery and ascendance into freedom, as he describes in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, written by himself*. As a newly-acquired house slave in Baltimore, the seven to eight-year-old Douglass received some beginning reading lessons from his mistress, until she was told to stop by her husband. Recognizing the precious value of this skill, Douglass set out to teach himself. He tricked local schoolboys to compete with him in writing contests to observe how they write. He stole private moments to practice reading and to study prose, especially the *Columbia Orator*.

In the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Alex Haley describes the self-education Malcolm X pursued in prison. Writing out each page of the dictionary, Malcolm began reading as much as fifteen hours a day, preparing him for his later speaking and writing successes.

In *The Woman Warrior*, Maxine Hong Kingston gives memories of growing up as a Chinese-American in California. Her mother cut the frenum of her tongue when she was an infant, presumably in order to keep her from being "tongue-tied" and to help her speak two languages, but Kingston finds this disturbing and ineffectual. She describes a painful childhood studying English in an indifferent school system where her language learning difficulties and cultural conflicts were treated with scorn.

Jimmy Santiago Baca, in *Working in the Dark: Reflections of a Poet of the Barrio*, describes his life growing up in a troubled and impoverished Chicano family. His traditional schooling was tainted by racial prejudice and bloody schoolyard brawls. But after being in prison, Baca found inspiration in language and painfully taught himself to read and write. Writing poetry brought new purpose and clarity to his life.

In his autobiography *Black Boy*, the 19-year-old Richard Wright resists his Jim Crow station in life by trying to get books out of the whites-only local library. He manages to get the library card of his employer and begins a covert study of the literary intellectuals of his day. The foreign world opened up to him drove his hunger to read more and teach himself how to write.

Richard Rodriguez's 1982 autobiography *Hunger for Memory* describes sacrificing his family and community relationships by pursuing education and becoming academically literate. The book recounts his success as a student acquiring the public language of school while losing his cultural identity.

Maya Angelou, in her autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, covers her life from age three to 16. After being raped at age eight by her mother's boyfriend, Angelou becomes silent and withdrawn. When a friend of her mother's introduces Angelou to the magic of great books, reading becomes a buoy for her spirits.

Luis Rodriguez's autobiography *Always Running: La Vida Loca*, describes his youth in gang culture. Rodriguez witnessed countless shootings, beatings, and arrests, then watched with increasing fear as drugs, murder, suicide, and senseless acts of street crime claimed friends and family members. Before long Rodriguez saw a way out of the

barrio through education and the power of words, and successfully broke free from years of violence and desperation.

Other works that can be read as literacy narratives include Langston Hughes' "Theme for English B;" Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*; Domitila Barrios de Chungara's *Let Me Speak! Testimony of Domitila, a Woman of the Bolivian Mines*; Ben Franklin's *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*; Eudora Welty's *One Writer's Beginnings*; Robert Coles' introduction to *The Call of Stories*; Nathaniel Hawthorne's "My Kinsman, Major Molineux;" Zitkala-Sa's "The School Days of an Indian Girl;" Anzia Yezierska's "Wings" in *Hungry Hearts*; Toni Cade Bambara's "The Lesson;" and Christy Brown's *My Left Foot*.

Outside of the legions of students who produce literacy narratives to fulfill their English requirements, the most prolific source of literacy narratives comes from perhaps the most literacy-conscious group: literacy instructors. Ever since Richard Rodriguez challenged affirmative action policies in academia, writers/scholars in English studies have been weighing in frequently with their insights into the politics and pedagogy of literacy instruction through their personal testimonies as students and teachers.

These literacy narratives typically weave accounts from the author's experience into their scholarly stances on literacy issues. This type of literacy narrative includes the following books: Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary: The Struggles and Achievements of America's Underprepared*, Victor Villenueva's *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*, Sharon Jean Hamilton's *My Name's Not Susie: A Life Transformed by Literacy*, Keith Gilyard's *Voices of the Self: A Study of Language Competence*, Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, and bell hooks' *Bone Black: memories of girlhood*.

But the scholarly brand of literacy narrative is now sprinkled throughout publications in English studies. Some of these articles include Linda Brodkey's "Writing on the Bias," Min-Zhan Lu's "From Silence to Words: Writing as Struggle," Ellen Tashie Frisina's "See Spot Run: Teaching My Grandmother to Read," Fan Shen's "The Classroom and the Wider Culture: Identity as a Key to Learning English Composition," Lillian Bridwell-Bowles' "Freedom, Form, Function," Paul Thomas' "How did I get here," Richard E. Miller's "The Nervous System," Es'kia Mphahlele's "Educating the Imagination," Barbara Melix's "From Outside, In," Elaine Richardson's introduction to *African American Literacies*, Robert Yagelski's "Mixed Messages" in *Literacy Matters*, and Geneva Smitherman's introduction to *Talkin' that talk*.

Literacy narratives do not only appear in autobiographies, biographies, novels, scholarly journals, and books. Paule Marshall's "Poet's in the Kitchen" appeared in *The New York Times*. And Amy Tan's "Mother Tongue" was first published in *Three Penny Review*, a literary journal.

This list of literacy narrative primary sources is by no means exhaustive. My intention is to provide an understanding of the makeup of the genre by giving examples of its varieties. Likewise, my listing of secondary sources studying literacy narratives is not comprehensive. Instead, my hope is to bring out the multiple theoretical applications drawn from literacy narratives.

Literacy Narratives in Research

Ethnographic Studies

Researchers taking on broad societal issues of literacy have used literacy narratives, usually written from the ethnographer's observations, to understand their subjects. Ethnographic case studies of individual reading and writing practices reveal the influences and activities that shape literacy skills and attitudes. Implicit to this approach is that literacy is not limited to the domain of school. In fact, ethnographic studies of literacy typically push past school experiences to view the daily practices where literacy has become woven into family and community life. As literacy ethnographer Lorri Neilsen describes her role, "I had to track them daily to understand the stories of their lives, and I had to probe into the past to see the roots of their literacy" (2).

The wide scope of ethnographic studies of literacy is often born out of critiques of practices in formal literacy education. Rather than measuring literacy levels with standardized tests, ethnographic case studies reveal the variety of ways literacy is learned and practiced, which are often unrecognized in school settings. Another conspicuous challenge to literacy educators in ethnographic studies is how the influences of school can inhibit progress in literacy development.

Shirley Brice Heath provides one of the foundational works as an ethnographer developing narratives of her subjects' literacy developments. In *Ways with Words*, Heath records and interprets the language learning habits of children from two nearby but historically separate communities in North Carolina. School and workplace desegregation in the late 1960s brought these communities face to face, revealing their distinct and sometimes foreign communicative practices. As Heath explains,

“Communication was a central concern of black and white teachers, parents, and mill personnel who felt the need to know more about how others communicated: why students and teachers often could not understand each other, why questions were sometimes not answered, and why habitual ways of talking and listening did not always seem to work” (2).

As Heath taught sociology and education to people from this community at a State university, she observed the linguistic outcome of these cross-cultural interactions: “Ascribing Black, Southern, or Standard English to speakers by racial membership was also not satisfactory to these students, for almost all of them, black and white, could shift among these varieties as occasion demanded” (3). The students questioned why research in language learning does not take into account the communities in which the subjects grew up:

Their questions pointed to the need for a full description of the primary face-to-face interactions of children from community cultures other than their own mainstream one. The ways of living, eating, sleeping, worshipping, using space, and filling time which surrounded these language learners would have to be accounted for as part of the milieu in which the processes of language learning took place (Heath 3).

Heath then launched what became an in-depth study of these community’s language learning habits. *Ways with Words* gives accounts in narrative anecdotes of how they learn speech and writing. Working and living among these communities for nine years, Heath records and interprets events surrounding language acquisition with acute detail, allowing her to argue for a multicultural understanding when teaching literacy. In

the two towns she studied, Heath found “the different ways children learned to use language were dependent on the ways in which each community structured their families, defined the roles that community members could assume, and played out their concepts of childhood that guided child socialization” (11). She abstracts from this finding that in communities throughout the world culturally distinct practices shape the way children learn to use language (Heath 11). As learned by the teachers in each town described in the book, ethnographic understanding of one’s students changed the approaches they used in the classroom. Heath concludes that “[the teachers’] interactive approach to incorporating these communities’ ways of talking, knowing, and expressing knowledge with those of the school enabled some Roadville and Trackton children to understand how to make choices among uses of languages and to link these choices to life chances” (343).

Deborah Brandt is another ethnographer who has mined narrative accounts of literacy learning. In her most recent book, *Literacy in American Lives*, Brandt sets out to understand how the experiences of common Americans have led them to learn how to read and write. Brandt describes one of the major aims of her book as looking “closely at the sources of the changing conditions of literacy learning and especially at the ways that Americans have faced the escalating pressure to provide for themselves and their children the kinds of literate skills demanded by life in these times” (2). Brandt studies 80 in-depth interviews tracing her subjects’ memories of learning to write, and read—but to a lesser extent (Brandt 9). The oral narratives provide insight into how ordinary people access literacy and what their motivations are for doing so.

Brandt connects her research to literacy instruction by pointing out that “many current debates about literacy education and policy continue to be based largely on indirect evidence, such as standardized test scores or education levels or surveys of reading habits” (11). Examining the narratives for where her subjects’ literacy skills find institutional sponsors, Brandt is able to critique the societal channels that direct literacy development. Her findings throw new light on America’s “literacy crisis,” pointing out the challenge of keeping up with escalating standards for literacy achievement since they are tied to the ever-changing demands of a multifaceted society. Brandt believes that beyond appreciating the benefits of parents reading to their children, we should also “acknowledge the complex demands on teaching and learning when knowledge, skills, and the communication systems they ride along all change even faster than children do” (207).

In another ethnographic study, Eve Gregory and Ann Williams use literacy narratives to confront myths surrounding literacy education in urban London. In *City Literacies*, Gregory and Williams study the literacy memories of over fifty people living in two contrasting London neighborhoods at the end of the twentieth century: the poor, immigrant community of Spitalfields and the wealthy, homogenous area called The City. Similar to other ethnographic literacy studies, these authors also emphasize the multiple sites of literacy learning outside of school, especially in Spitalfields: “This celebration is not just for children’s success in mastering the reading and writing demanded in classrooms they attended, but for their out-of-school literacy activities which usually remained invisible to both the school and society’s eyes” (xvi).

Gregory and Williams use these literacy accounts to dispel deep-seated myths about literacy, primarily that economic poverty equates with poor literacy skills. A number of other myths they challenge as well. They scrutinize the notion that a particular type of parenting is linked to early reading success: “In this book, we see successful reading by many who did not have access to what is now recognized as ‘good’ literature and whose parents did not participate in this practice” (xvii). Likewise, a “correct method” for teaching reading is critiqued. The authors claim that their findings refute the belief among educators that initial literacy should be taught through a particular approach to safeguard young students from failure: “Yet the memories of both families and teachers in this book reveal a wealth of successful teaching methods” (xvii).

Throughout the study, Gregory and Williams focus on unrecognized literacy successes, discovered in a poor population typically studied for its deficits: “Spanning almost a hundred years, the people in this book speak up for all those learning to read successfully in economically disadvantaged areas” (xviii).

Teachers Studying Students

In a step removed from the fieldwork of ethnographers, teachers use literacy narratives to study the cultural influences that shape their students’ identities as literacy learners. Similar to ethnographers, these studies sometimes take teachers out of the classroom and into the students’ communities. But the scope of these studies is typically on student attitudes toward literacy education. The aim of these studies is usually to reveal something new to teachers about their students, preparing them with new understanding and sometimes supplying them with specific techniques for the classroom.

Ellen Cushman and Chalon Emmons describe in *School's Out!* a service learning course that brought together University of California at Berkley students with members of a San Francisco YMCA. In shaping this contact zone, the students produced literacy narratives. Cushman and Emmons show how becoming conscious of their literacy histories prepared them to assist the YMCA members. The UCB students' reflections on their own experiences in school and with literacy shaped their literacy activities with YMCA members (223). Cushman and Emmons analyze the literacy story of one student, Sally, and her subsequent interactions when working with a YMCA member, Tanisha. Sally developed a respectful approach to Tanisha's writing that made her peer review positive and productive. The authors partially credit her success to her knowledge of her literacy history: "Using the writing and talking that she did in class to reflect on the lessons she had learned about in school, Sally was able to transform the potentially harmful contact zone of the academy where 'I' is erased into a space where she could negotiate new understandings of herself in relation to academic writing" (226).

Literacy narratives in this study are used to illustrate the potential in service learning courses. Writing their literacy stories while interacting with youth with distinctly different literacy pasts "shaped the ways students came to see academic literacy and their own writing and reading practices within the university" (223). The bridge afforded through literacy narratives fosters a dialogic relationship between community-based and academic literacies, which the authors believe should be one of the primary functions of service-learning courses (223).

In *Conversational Borderlands: Language and Identity in an Alternative Urban High School*, Betsy Rymes studies how students who had formerly dropped out of high

school become “successful” (as identified by teachers and administrators), using a new language to describe their education and literacy histories, a language she calls “dropping in.” These “success stories” sound different from the former “dropping out” perspective, Rymes notes. Rymes analyzes a set of personal narratives by students who had either graduated or were near to graduating. They narrate their pasts as “dropouts” in a radically different way from those who never found success at City School. Like students who told dropping out stories, the authors of these “dropping in” stories frame the events of their lives in a way that displays their own sense of the “right” choices to make: “These successful students emphasize how City School guided them away from unfortunate pasts and pointed them to bright futures. These storytellers denigrate pre-City School decisions and credit City School with giving them a fresh start” (73). The radically different perspectives represented by histories of dropping out as opposed to dropping in reveal to Rymes how the institution itself acts as a coauthor in the stories told (viii).

Rymes uses stories of student literacy development to show how the authors’ accounts are influenced by the ways educators view them: “The shaping power of school reform reaches beyond simply educating the child; it is the very shaping of the child. The institutions shape those stories that shape who we become” (90). Rymes claims that “dropping out identities can be axed with Machiavellian rhetorical strategies. Lives these young people lived and believed in for a number of years become, simply, ‘the wrong path’” (91).

In her study “The Education of African American Youth: Literacy Practices and Identity Representation in Church and School,” Michelle Kelly presents instances of how

particular “literacy events” in and out of school help to develop a strong sense of historical and cultural identity for a group of African American middle school students from Salt Lake City, Utah.

Working with and observing these students in both a church and school setting, Kelly was able to gather data on their literacy experiences. Following the notion that learners develop literacy practices in specific social contexts, Kelly observed many opportunities for these students to understand and express their identities as African Americans. Through their church, these students became exposed to African dance and drumming. They also learned about the history of African Americans in their state and community. Kelly believes these culturally-based literacy experiences, though separate from traditional school-based literacy lessons, may be used to develop the literacy valued in a traditional classroom: “These experiences provided students with a set of tools that seemed to encourage a flexibility and a creativity to help them move between community and school-based literacies” (257).

One student in particular is highlighted. Anthony struggled to pass his English class because he never completed his assignments. Given an assignment that allowed him to draw on his out-of-school literacies, Anthony produced a high quality of writing in his English class. As Kelly describes, “Anthony did A-quality work on this assignment because it explicitly created a space for him to air issues that concerned him” (256). When Anthony was able to bring the complex understanding of himself and his identity as a member of a larger community into the school, his purpose as a communicator became more meaningful. Acknowledging the literacies he has command over, Anthony perceived himself as a highly literate person. Then, he used the understandings he gained

through his participation in the African-American community to guide his uses of literacies taught at his school.

These literacy stories challenge educators to broaden their view of literacy skills to include the abilities students bring with them to school from their home communities. Especially for teachers who are culturally different from their students, these stories reinforce the need to appreciate the cultural practices of one's students.

Pedagogy for the Writing Classroom

Literacy narratives, including prompts to write them, are now commonplace in composition readers. The genre has become increasingly popular among teachers for its potential to introduce multicultural issues to the class. For instance, Mary Soliday believes a “pedagogy of reciprocity” can be achieved by inviting students from diverse backgrounds into the classroom through their literacy stories. Soliday recommends using the genre to promote a dialogue that moves between students' worlds and the teachers' to illuminate connections as well as highlight differences (“The Politics” 272).

Composition readers steer teachers to use literacy narratives to open up students to different cultural perspectives. The approach typically offered in composition readers is to read and analyze published literacy narratives for how the described language relates to and expands the student-reader's experience. For instance, Sheena Gillespie and Robert Singleton in their *Across Cultures: A Reader for Writers*, devote a chapter to education, which contains several literacy narratives. Their method for engaging students with the material is to ask: “Is a person educated who knows only his or her own culture

as it is at that moment’(116)? Gillespie and Singleton urge their audience to notice the different cultural expressions evident in this country, and throughout its history.

In her 2004 composition reader *On Writing: A Process Reader*, Wendy Bishop devotes a chapter to reading and writing literacy narratives, both of which provide insights into the ways literacy changes one’s life. Bishop encourages students to think of their own development as readers and writers, “the old self who didn’t know how—or like—to read or write, over time may have become the new self” (52). Bishop makes it clear that such stories do not necessarily portray happy successes. “Your literacy narrative,” Bishop claims, “can provide a place where you can look at and critique your schooling and challenge your education” (52). She presents the assignment as an opportunity to mature as a learner: “Writing a literacy narrative helps you understand the literature you read, allows you to study your own writing processes and growth as a writer and reader, and may help you create public voices and identities and explore professional goals” (52). Describing writing as self-transforming, this assignment allows for self-understanding in many ways, since “Who we are, where we grew up, and under what conditions all shape our literacy” (53).

Along with the eight professional and three student literacy narrative examples, Bishop prompts students to consider family, schooling, general life experiences, cultural affiliations, and religious backgrounds as influences that shape their literate identities. She points out how each reading uniquely connects issues of literacy to the author’s life—a multiplicity that will continue with each student’s story. Bishop’s framing of the student’s work as contributions equally as valuable as the published pieces breaks from what composition teacher J. Blake Scott calls the conservative approach to using literacy

narratives in the writing classroom. Scott warns that the traditional emphasis on reading professional models conserves and preserves their versions of literacy and literacy development, while marginalizing the student's perspective (114). Bishop's use of literacy narratives fits closely with a pedagogy Mary Soliday suggests, allowing "students to represent themselves in reference to each others' literacy stories and to those of professional writers" ("Translating Self" 522).

The writing pedagogy offered by J. Blake Scott moves away from using professional literacy narratives. Instead of studying writing models, Scott uses an autoethnographic approach, helping students excavate their literacy histories with a series of process-based strategies. He first engages students in a number of collaborative exercises, then he encourages them to develop their own approaches and focuses, then finally he invents and writes along with the students (109). Critical to uncovering the material for the students are heuristics like literacy timelines, and questions to prompt memories of and attitudes toward literacy. Scott's student-based approach applies a process pedagogy to generate original literacy narratives.

Teacher Training

The push for multicultural education has turned the pedagogical tool of literacy narratives back onto the teacher. Narrative provides an interesting site of praxis, as education teachers Caroline Clark and Carmen Medina point, "a place to bring our thinking and theorizing about literacy and multiculturalism together with approaches to teaching and teacher education" (65). Personal narratives open one's eyes to varied cultural perspectives. Literacy narratives put the cultural focus on language and

education. As a result, studying and writing literacy narratives prepare teachers for classrooms with students from different cultural backgrounds.

In a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association in 1997, Catherine O'Callaghan explores the social construction of four preservice teachers' instructional strategies for reading. The students had just completed their fourteenth week of student teaching. One of the four sources of data collection was the participant's literacy narrative. Analyzing these stories indicated that these student teachers' instructional strategies for reading were rooted in their own experiences as students learning to read. Two participants who had experienced a supportive literacy environment during childhood chose a nurturing conceptualization of teaching for their metaphor. Two who did not enjoy reading during childhood chose metaphors that emphasized the teacher as an authoritarian figure (O'Callaghan).

Anita Helle applies literacy narratives to preparing students to teach or tutor in community literacy settings. Her approach is drawn from a graduate teaching seminar she teaches at Oregon State University. In this course, Helle confronts the gap between literature and literacy instruction by analyzing literacy myths and literacy narrative in autobiographies, memoirs, and narratives of socialization, colonization, and empire by professional writers and educators such as Richard Rodriguez, Mike Rose, Lisa Delpit, Jamaica Kincaid, Linda Brodkey, bell hooks, Victor Villaneuva, and Jane Tompkins (175). Helle also requires that her students "develop narrative histories of literacy based on interviews with other subjects, examining the relationship of literate subjectivity to motifs of home, schooling, nation, gender, class, and ethnicity" (175). The author believes that these approaches illuminate the intersections of literature and literacy in

social, cultural, historical, and political contexts, the broadened frame for viewing literacy necessary for community literacy instructors (175).

Caroline Clark and Carmen Medina help prepare teachers to work with diverse student bodies in their article “How Reading and Writing Literacy Narratives Affect Preservice Teachers’ Understandings of Literacy, Pedagogy, and Multiculturalism.” The authors suggest an approach for preservice teachers based on the curriculum of a course in Ohio State University’s Masters of Education program. Examining the OSU course would reveal “how students’ understandings of literacy and multiculturalism were mediated through the acts of reading and writing literacy narratives” (64).

Clark and Medina studied the literacy narratives and responses to literacy narratives of sixty students: “We asked students to take a close look at themselves, their beliefs about literacy, and their coming into literacy. Their writing and sharing of personal literacy narratives helped to mediate their reading of other narratives” (68). The authors believe that writing and reading these narratives made students see that literacy is not a natural act. Students came to recognize the multiple ways in which individuals enter into literacy, the difficulties involved in this process, and particularly the social, cultural, and economic backdrop against which this process occurs. Through writing about their coming into literacy, Clark and Medina’s students “came to acknowledge the individuals such as parents, siblings, and teachers involved in their literacy; the role that access to particular institutions played in their literacy process; and the effect that cultural divides and economic factors had on their access to schooling” (69).

Gender Studies

As a tool for analyzing the social construction of one's identity, literacy narratives have also been useful for research into gender issues. In a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English in 1991, Shirley Rose examines the ways in which college freshmen construct a gendered cultural identity in their literacy narratives. She also points out the ways in which teachers construct the gendered, literate identity of their student authors. Three female teacher-readers were asked to: (1) evaluate the quality of each of thirteen student literacy narratives on a scale of one to ten; (2) predict each author's chances for successfully completing college; and (3) guess, using clues from the essays, each author's gender. The teacher-readers were asked to repeat the exercise with the same thirteen student narratives eighteen to twenty months later. Results of the project (nine hours of taped and transcribed conversations) indicated that the teachers read texts as male or female despite their claims to the contrary, and that their own literacy practices shaped and were shaped by their own gender identity (Rose).

Michael Kuhne, in a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference of College Composition and Communication in 1995, also used student literacy narratives as a catalyst for discussion and analysis regarding the complexities of gender. In his class, students exchange their accounts of literacy with one another and in small groups of three to four; then they do collaborative, quasi-ethnographic studies of them. They write and exchange impressions, then sift and sort different aesthetic and critical scrim, usually of their own devising, and invariably groups will return to gender as one of those scrim (Kuhne).

Literary Criticism

As a lens for analyzing literature, literacy narratives help to move literacy studies into the field of literary criticism. Analyzing a text as a literacy narrative isolates the community and cultural influences that construct a character through his or her use of language. For example, this lens can be applied to coming-of-age fictions, artist narratives, autobiographies, and biographies.

In 1991, Janet Carey Eldred uses a short story by Nathaniel Hawthorne to show how literary texts provide forums for studies of literacy (686). Analyzing “My Kinsman, Major Molineux,” Eldred argues that the story’s characters are constructed by literacy models (696). These models explain, and justify, the distinctions between literacy haves and have-nots. Eldred argues that this lens throws light on the myth of literacy success stories. The story critiques the literacy “rags to riches” story by portraying no upward mobility despite literacy advancement. Her analysis of Hawthorne’s story shows how “any short story that can be read as a story of psychological development can be reread as a story of socialization, as a narrative describing problems with the multiple literacies of a given time and place” (697). According to Eldred, “reading for literacy issues, we can use what is said and not said to better understand the discursive world of the cultural context and its literary artifacts” (697).

This same lens is used by Janet Carey Eldred and Peter Mortensen on George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion*. Their analysis contributes to the criticism surrounding the text by engaging in a central theme unacknowledged by other critics: “the place that society and language hold in schooling” (534). Viewing the story through this lens, they point out the romanticized notions of literacy as the key to empowering individuals.

They also critique value-laden assumptions about dialect and the association of progress with acquiring certain types of literacy (513-522).

Narrative as Therapy

Literacy narratives also offer potential in the mental health fields. “Story and narrative are primary tools in the work educators and counselors do,” according to Witherell and Noddings in *Stories Lives Tell*: “the use of narrative and dialogue can serve as a model for teaching and learning across the boundaries of disciplines, professions, and cultures” (2).

As a therapist, Robert Coles insists that his subjects' stories, not his own theories and preoccupations, are of central interest. Too much psychiatry is based, he contends, on the elitist notion that only the therapist can discern the true story, while the patient dodges and evades the truth. In contrast, Coles says that he has "tried primarily to convey or evoke the thoughts and feelings of others.... I have tried to describe the circumstances, the conditions of life, that they as particular individuals must come to terms with and (such is their fate) try somewhat desperately to overcome"(19).

In *The Call of Stories*, he relates how he received an invaluable piece of advice from Dr. Ludwig when, as a young doctor, he was beginning to feel his way around the psychiatric wards at Massachusetts General Hospital:

“The people who come to see us" [Dr. Ludwig said after hearing Coles use the word *psychodynamics* once too often] "bring us their stories. They hope they tell them well enough so that we understand the truth of their lives. They hope we

know how to interpret their stories correctly. We have to remember that what we hear is *their* story." [20]

To listen deeply was, for Dr. Ludwig, much more important than "getting a fix" on the patient or deciding on a "therapeutic agenda." While these may have a value, he preferred the human being to the abstraction, the "story" to reductive formulas that rushed past it.

Psychiatrist Rita Charon explores the use of literacy narratives in clinical work. Charon applies literary narrative theory to the storytelling that takes place in the doctor's office, conceptualizing the patient as the writer or teller and the doctor as the reader or listener. By examining clinical medicine as a narrative enterprise, shot through with the ambiguities and language-borne allusiveness of the fictional text, the author shows ways in which patients and doctors may better understand their complex and often unsuccessful attempts to hear one another to the end.

Literacy Narratives in My Study

The texts I have collected for this study are written by students exploring past experiences with literacy. Similar to literacy autoethnographies, these accounts detail past experiences with language acquisition and intend to position the narrators within the larger context of their lives. But my focus is not ethnographic, investigating the "economic and other material influences in literacy" as Brandt pursues, or the ways in which children learn to act, believe, and value like those around them, as Shirley Brice Heath analyzes in literacy stories (6). Instead, my study tries to connect such contextual factors to the language learner.

Several disciplines employ literacy narratives for offering ways to tap the variety of cultural influences at play in literacy acquisition; my interest, though, is in how the genre offers a channel for those diverse voices. Like Mary Soliday who views literacy narratives as “sites of self-translation” (511), I see the literacy narratives collected in this study as sites of redefinition. The prompt I used for mining the students’ literacy backgrounds steered them toward moments of communicative mastery, presenting themselves as successes in a field broader than but related to English composition.

What I believe to be new to composition studies is the way I use the student essays to shape my class lessons. The knowledge about communication that my students reveal through their narratives steers my pedagogy for teaching rhetorical concepts. My study offers how literacy is probed and how the students’ experiences fold back into the class. Though the pedagogy I espouse in this study produces student essays on language acquisition generally, it is more specifically focused on knowledge acquisition as it relates to language skills. I am not working with a generic category of literacy narratives. My pedagogy aims to bring out lessons learned about language acquisition or accumulation, in order to build students’ confidence, the foundation of literacy.

Chapter 4: Three Meanings of Literacy in Literacy Narratives

Aristotle's theory of appealing to an audience by shaping one's ethos long ago formalized our awareness of how the way we sound affects the way we are perceived. Some see the relationship even closer. Language use and identity are together "twin skin," as linguist Gloria Anzaldua puts it in her autobiographical *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*: "I am my language" (59). Because literacy is a window into identity, stories about learning how to read and write overlap with autobiography. In general, stories that foreground how one has learned to read and write are literacy narratives, but they could be considered the part of a life story (in fiction or non-fiction) that deals with language acquisition, particularly how the character has been able to move from one linguistic community into a new, more empowering one. As a subcategory found within biography, autobiography, and coming-of-age fiction, the literacy narrative plays out the drama one experiences in learning how to communicate in a new social context.

As a composition instructor, I count myself among the teachers exploring the potential of literacy narratives in the writing classroom, but my interest here is in the genre itself, how it portrays literacy through the way the characters navigate the drama. The fifteen narratives I draw from in my sample range from well-known to obscure, old to new, long to short—but all are published pieces. I intend to show how this genre portrays characters who undergo three different types of conflicts surrounding literacy. But this textual analysis is ultimately meant to serve writing pedagogy (see Chapter 4), not literary or rhetorical criticism. I argue that the characters' conceptions of literacy shape the dramatic tension. The ways these tensions are resolved also give insight into

the variable nature of literacy. In fact, the tensions sometimes build and release according to the characters' shifting definitions of literacy. I have organized the chapter around these distinct types of literacy tensions, concluding that understanding the kind of literacy drama being played out reflects on how it is—or can be—resolved.

Three Meanings of Literacy

Since dramatic tension is particular to characters and their situations, becoming literate takes on different meanings in the literacy stories I surveyed. Literacy is perceived in relation to the characters' needs in a new social context, how they can participate in the language of the new social group and share in their power and privileges. Examining this genre, one realizes the various types of literacy competing for power, all of which may have relevance to any individual's transition into a linguistic community. In my study I find three categories of literacy, which indicate distinct loci of power. These types of literacy correspond with the sources of dramatic tension faced by the characters. The first and most frequent kind is school literacy: the tradition among American educators that sets standards for the way educated Americans should read and write. Another category in these stories is fitting into one's community literacy: the communicative standards particular to one's home environment. The third category, another source of tension, comes from the self, or personal literacy: the standards for presenting oneself in a way that satisfies one's self-image.

These categories correspond with Margaret Gallego and Sandra Hollingsworth's definitions in *What Counts as Literacy?* They describe these locational categories as

“placeholders” for arguments that demonstrate their interrelatedness and challenge notions of a fixed literacy. Here are their conceptions of these literacy categories:

school literacies—the learning of interpretive and communicative processes needed to adapt socially to school and other dominant language contexts, and the use or practice of those processes in order to gain a conceptual understanding of school subjects

community literacies—the appreciation, understanding, and/or use of interpretive and communicative traditions of culture and community, which sometimes stand as critiques of school literacies

personal literacies—the critical awareness of ways of knowing and believing about self that comes from thoughtful examination of historical or experiential and genre-specific backgrounds in school and community language settings, which sometimes stand as critiques of both school literacies and community literacies (5).

I find these definitions very helpful for understanding the nexus of multiple literacies. If literacy is understandable through broad categories of where it functions, then the variables within any location give rise to many kinds of literacy, “institutionalized and not,” as Lauren Resnick found in her study of literacy outside of school. Especially useful to me are the tensions Gallego and Hollingsworth suggest between the categories. Community literacy can conflict with school literacy, and personal literacy can conflict with both school and community literacies. These downstream relationships I believe are represented in literacy narratives. Fitting into one’s community can have new meaning after feeling its communicative practices

devalued beside school standards. And the importance of one's self-image can become heightened when encountering generalized social forces from one's school and community.

I revise their definitions given the context of my analysis, literacy narratives. Becoming literate as the goal of a story emphasizes the hurdle implied by the term. I think studying this genre is helpful to remind us that standards are central to what it means to be literate, even when taking into account multiple literacies. You have to meet the criteria to pass, to fit in, to feel understood. Literacy is about matching up. It is about the personal judgments in "making an impression," "hitting it off," "feeling you." And power shifts with who does the judging. The rough locations for literacy brought out by Gallego and Hollingsworth help us to see how different societal elements struggle over who gets to be the judge. I believe one step toward individual empowerment is to realize that literacy involves negotiating competing judgments. Literacy narratives help by dramatizing courses taken for navigating such forces.

It is not surprising that literacy narratives are overwhelmingly authored by people of color. With the exception of Sharon Hamilton, all of the authors of the narratives in my analysis are non-white. Race and ethnicity become illuminated for students when their use of language differs from educators who model the culture of middle class whites. The divide between one's personal and community literacies and the school standard is what drives the drama of literacy narratives. The genre thus makes a comment about whiteness--indirectly. The educated standard allows students modeling middle class whites to stand by silently and notice the difference of others. According to George Lipsitz, one way of investing in whiteness, an identity that provides one with

resources, power, and opportunity, is to participate in the exclusion of other outsiders (viii). The dearth of white voices in literacy narratives suggests that school literacy contributes to the unmarked category of whiteness, which as Lipsitz explains, “never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations” (1).

The following analysis details the forces of school, community, and personal literacy as portrayed in literacy narratives, highlighting the cultural conflicts people negotiate in becoming literate. One can see through this genre how individuals can reconcile these competing pressures to be literate in different ways. In the end, I find that individuals become increasingly empowered as they accept community and personal definitions of literacy that borrow from rather than acquiesce to the school standard (also see Gallego and Hollingsworth 1-23). But there is a price to pay in defining the language of one’s community by means of a school standard. The school standard is preset above community literacy, which represents less formally educated social groups. Such comparative definitions also make for a showdown of cultures, setting one up for either failure in school or betrayal of one’s community. But these consequences are nothing new for marginalized dialect speakers, and acknowledging one’s community standards as nearly comparable to standard English surely costs less than the approach of teachers who believe they should eradicate local slangs.

The most empowering definition of literacy I find in these stories comes in one’s personal standards. Judging language according to how well it serves one’s needs in being understood has enormous commonsense appeal. Instead of the drama presented by community literacy challenging the school standard, personal literacy relieves the tension

and provides a bridge to being school literate. In some stories the narrators exploit new uses of language to express more clearly the ways they would like to be understood. Narrators who develop their own meaning for being literate undergo a change that allows them to command multiple literacies³.

School Literacy

A traditional view of literacy defines it as language use according to an academic standard. This definition has had an indelible influence on our culture since it dates back to the foundation of our national educational system. A national conference to unify school requirements in 1892 stated that the purpose of English studies is (1) “to enable the student to understand the expressed thoughts of others and to give expression to thoughts of his own” and (2) “to cultivate a taste for reading, to give the pupil some acquaintance with good literature” (qtd. in Milner 33). In this definition, literacy is a fixed, definite skill. It is *the* mastery of *the* communicative forms one learns in *the* English classroom—*any* English classroom. Demonstrating this uniformed standard identifies one as literate.

Fitting in with those who are already literate is part of this definition: knowing the same texts, the ways they are discussed, and the proper language for literate discourse. E.D. Hirsch, Jr. and Alan Bloom defended this tradition in the 1980s by pointing out the need for a common culture for meaningful communication. According to these culture critics, a standard for what literate Americans should know is important so that we can

³ On literacy narratives and self-transformation see Bishop *On Writing* 52-4. Bishop explains to students that moments of literacy learning are “sights of self-translation,” events that define the person one has become.

approach issues on common ground, “a network of information that all competent readers possess” (Hirsch 2). In terms of pedagogy, such critics argue, this standard needs to be specifically identified because it contains the tradition of exceptional writing that helps students elevate their own expressions. Various scholars in linguistics and composition studies have leveled challenges to the hegemonic standards of academic literacy.⁴ Over the past three decades, some movement away from the established tradition has occurred as new lenses for literary criticism have brought new texts reflecting a wider range of topics and expressions into the literary canon. But the long tradition of praising language and texts associated with academia still manifests itself in the attitude that speaking and writing Standard English elevates one into a hard-working, model citizen (Gee “Social Linguistics” 32).

As an institutionalized standard in American education, literacy has a specific cultural association. Demonstrating school literacy aligns one with the cultural perspective of those who have also successfully learned the standard. Being literate in this way defines one as part of an educated class, allowing one to share in the privileges of that group. This definition of literacy makes one’s use of language a social litmus test. With the briefest utterance or scribbling, one can be marked as inside or outside of the educated set.⁵

⁴ In “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class,” James Berlin claims that ideology imbricates classroom rhetorics that favor privileged social classes. Mike Rose argues in “The Language of Exclusion” that the attention on skills remediation in University writing programs unfairly demotes students who have received schooling that leaves them under prepared. Throughout her compilation *Talkin that Talk*, Geneva Smitherman repeatedly points out the racist assumptions of Standard English.

⁵ See Brodkey’s “Tropics” on the definition of literate through illiterate other.

Social Elevator

Narratives about acquiring literacy nearly always contend with the issues of social elevation associated with possessing school literacy. These stories are often motivated by the difficulties encountered when trying to adapt to the standards for literacy promoted in school. The feeling of exclusion experienced when judged by the literate in-crowd creates dramatic tension. The plot line traces the work of becoming included in the educated group. Tension varies according to the type of barriers that keep the character from school literacy and the character's available means to construct a bridge to the school community. This experience of "becoming literate" is usually presented within the context of "becoming educated," implying that communicative practices already mastered are not educated and not literate. These types of literacy narratives focus on negotiating the new environment of school literacy as one shapes--or discovers--new ways of being in the process.

Richard Rodriguez depicts his experience with learning English as the key to his assimilation and "the achievement of *publi*ndividuality" (239). School literacy, he claims, brought him into a successful life:

Only when I was able to think of myself as an American, no longer an alien in *gringo* society, could I seek the rights and opportunities necessary for full public individuality. The social and political advantages I enjoy as a man result from the day that I came to believe that my name, indeed, is *Rich-heard Road-ree-guess* (239).

Frederick Douglass' slave narrative gives us perhaps the most dramatic example of the social elevator plot line: literacy frees him from a brutish mind-set and defines him

as an intellectual spokesperson. Once introduced to school literacy, Douglass becomes convinced that education is the social lift necessary for his development and survival. The “inch” of learning he receives from his owner’s wife he converts to “an ell,” devising cunning ways to complete his learning to read and write (53). This narrative outline follows what Philippe Lejeune, in *On Autobiography*, considers a central intention of autobiographers to create a new self through “(re)discovered realities” (ix). Autobiographers use life events to forge the new selves they desire. Literacy narratives make their way into autobiography because of the potentially dramatic social transformation of the “uneducated” who become school literate.

So enticing is the idea that we can improve our circumstances through our own efforts that we believe it whether it is true or not. There is a mythic quality to the plot of the self-reliant character learning to read and write, thus bringing about his own success. As Harvey Graff points out in his critique of the promises of literacy leading to social elevation, literacy skills are not enough to change the social fabric of a nation (195-234). Graff’s “literacy myth,” reveals “the contradictions in the perceived connections between education, employment levels, and economic development, to argue that literacy was not always central to jobs, earnings and industrialization in the nineteenth century in the manner typically assumed” (233). Literacy and education in general “offer less in rewards than [they engender] in expectations,” (242) according to Graff. Nevertheless, the myth that literacy leads to empowerment in a democratic society is part of our American can-do ethos, still purveyed throughout American literature (Graff 1-19; Eldred 696).

George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion* stages the transformation of a street merchant

into a duchess through education. The triumph of illiterate flower girl, Eliza Doolittle, into well-spoken lady is owed to her teacher, Henry Higgins. Eliza agrees to the experiment with Henry's enticements of a better life, "chocolates, and taxis, and gold, and diamonds" (45). Eliza is eager to become "a lady in a flower shop" (38)), but after her lessons are complete, her status becomes less certain: "What is to become of me? What is to become of me?" (100), she asks Henry. The seduction of social elevation draws Eliza and sets up Shaw's target. The romantic picture Eliza and Henry imagined proves entirely false. Her new fluency does not provide her social mobility. Instead, speaking as an educated lady confuses and limits her sense of herself. According to Eldred and Mortensen's analysis of the play, "the domesticating power of literacy enfeebles Eliza; it does not liberate her" (519). The importance of Henry's school lessons diminishes, in fact, as the story progresses, Eliza realizing that "the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she's treated" (122). Shaw seems to be aiming his criticism at men who limit mobility for women, as Henry does by treating Eliza as a subordinate, no matter how properly she speaks.

Maya Angelou, in her autobiography, also uses literacy as a vehicle for transforming characters. But the school literacy portrayed in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* does not lead to opportunity or change of circumstance. In this case, school literacy offers self-elevation through escape. Since literacy engages imagination, the scenes literacy invokes invite fantasies of better lives, both because of the new scenes described and because knowing such language allows one to feel above the surrounding illiterate world.

Marguerite, Angelou's narrator, overlays romantic notions of literacy onto

idealized images of her long-absent father. When she first meets him at age seven, she describes him as speaking “Proper English, like the school principal, and even better” (45). Her father’s language immediately leads her to new flights of fantasy: “Everyone could tell from the way he talked and from the car and clothes that he was rich and maybe had a castle in California” (45). Though this dream is short-lived, the connection remains throughout the book between school literacy and worlds longed for.

When Marguerite describes the first time she is sexually abused, she reacts by “read[ing] more than ever” (63). She chooses Horatio Alger because “His heroes were always good, always won, and were always boys” (63)—the safe gender she wishes she could be. Later, after Marguerite is raped, she withdraws from her life “like an old biscuit, dirty and inedible” (77), until she meets the highly literate Mrs. Flowers—“the aristocrat of Black Stamps” (77). Flowers becomes Marguerite’s “first life line” (79) by reading to her literary classics and allowing Marguerite to borrow the books. Flower’s appeal as a mentor is enhanced by her refined and articulate manner. In this woman Marguerite found the personification of her literate fantasies:

She appealed to me because she was like people I had never met personally. Like women in English novels who walked the moors (whatever they were) with their loyal dogs racing at a respectful distance. Like the women who sat in front of roaring fireplaces, drinking tea incessantly from silver trays full of scones and crumpets. Women who walked over the “heath” and read morocco-bound books and had two last names divided by a hyphen (79).

Flowers’ requests for Marguerite to recite poems become invitations into Flowers’ privileged literate world. Marguerite relishes these encounters as “a chance to exchange

the Southern bitter wormwood for a cup of mead with Beowulf or a hot cup of tea or milk with Oliver Twist” (84). Throughout the narrative, Marguerite trades up for the experiences told in canonical literature, regularly seeking comfort and companionship in books and comparing characters in her life with ones from literature.

Alienation

One might think of the transformational view of school literacy as the initial exigence for the literacy narrative genre. And this pressure to “improve” oneself is present throughout the genre. Though originally this theme was presented as an opportunity for social improvement, a secondary effect is the degraded status of one’s home language and culture when one is obliged to learn the school standard. The school standard becomes a resented marker of one’s difference from the way educated people communicate. For instance, in *Pygmalion*, Henry’s lessons lead Eliza into cultural displacement, unable to “go back to selling flowers on the street, [nor] remain in the world of Buckingham Palace” (520), as Eldred and Mortensen explain. Her alienation comes from the different literacies she now possesses and it is dramatized as she sticks her tongue out at herself after the ball where she successfully masquerades as a lady.

The judgment implied in school literacy is especially clear in the many stories where the characters are involved in formal schooling. In her autobiography, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, Maxine Hong Kingston’s response to learning the school standard was to freeze up: “During the first silent year I spoke to no one at school, did not ask before going to the lavatory, and flunked kindergarten” (231). Jimmy Santiago Baca, in *Working in the Dark: Reflections of a poet of the barrio*,

describes his alienation succinctly: “From the time I was seven, teachers had been punishing me for not knowing my lessons by making me stick my nose in a circle chalked on the blackboard. Ashamed of not understanding and fearful of asking questions, I dropped out of school in the ninth grade” (4). Perceived as “outside” by academic “insiders,” these authors felt the distance was too far to bridge.

Besides experiences of personal alienation from the standards of school, stereotypes also push students away from learning school literacy. In his autobiography *Always Running: Mi Vida Loca*, Luiz Rodriguez, points out this classroom dynamic plainly—“By the time I was in high school, I had become introspective and quiet. I wanted to be untouchable. White teachers favored white students, I was labeled a thug” (84).

In one scene from Richard Wright’s autobiography, *Black Boy*, the narrator describes how he freezes at the blackboard when told to write his name: “I realized how utterly I was failing and I grew weak and leaned my hot forehead against the cold blackboard. The room burst into a loud and prolonged laugh and my muscles froze” (88-89). Wright attributes this paralysis to racial alienation: “The hostility of the whites had become so deeply implanted in my mind and feelings that it had lost direct connection with the daily environment in which I lived” (87).

As an Asian-American, Amy Tan describes in her autobiographical essay, “Mother Tongue,” how she had to resist the assumptions of her teachers that she was best suited to study math and science instead of literature (29). In *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*, rhetoric and composition scholar Victor Villenueva, Jr. articulates the separate status one feels when marked by a conspicuous social label:

Choosing to speak the language of the dominant, choosing racelessness, bears a price, however. And that price is alienation—the loss of fictive kinships without being fully adopted by the white community. “Where is your blackness?” from the one community, and “a credit to your race” from the other. “Where is your raza?” from the one and “a child of Mexican immigrants” from the other (40).

These narratives also document alienation from school due to an absence of role models who reflect academic literacy. Mike Rose, another composition studies scholar, explains in *Lives of the Boundary: The Struggles and Achievements of America's Underprepared* how the people in his life did not make sense within the lessons of school: “I realize now how consistently I defended myself against the lessons I couldn't understand and the people and events of South L.A. that were too strange to view head-on” (19). He describes a memory of his teachers, his school models, as “faceless” and “far away” (19). In *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, author Alex Haley describes Malcolm's motive for self-education to the lack of educated examples around him. He could communicate extremely well following the communicative norms around him. But he felt limited by those examples:

In the street, I had been the most articulate hustler out there—I had commanded attention when I said something. But now, trying to write simple English, I not only wasn't articulate, I wasn't even functional. How would I sound writing in slang, the way I would say it, something such as “Look, daddy, let me pull your coat about a cat, Elijah Muhammad—” (Haley 220).

For some narrators, being in school presented a cultural obstacle too difficult to navigate. Kingston explains her tongue-tied condition as cultural miscommunication: “At

first it did not occur to me I was supposed to talk or to pass kindergarten” (231). Like Kingston, composition scholar Min-Zhan Lu describes her effort to keep the communicative standards of home and school separate as a struggle. In her article “From Silence to Words: Writing as Struggle,” Lu explains, “constantly having to switch back and forth between the discourse of home and that of school made me sensitive and self-conscious about the struggle I experienced every time I tried to read, write, or think in either discourse” (441-2). The influence of each discourse upon the other created adulterated versions she could not trust. “I could no longer be confident of my command over either language,” she continues, “because I had discovered that when I was not careful—or even when I was—my reading and writing often surprised me with its impurity” (443). Navigating the two discourses had a silencing effect on her, too.

Richard Rodriguez, in *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*, similar to other literacy narratives, reports feeling alienated encountering classroom English. When he was commanded to “Speak up” in class, he fell “Silent, waiting for the bell to sound, I remained dazed, diffident, afraid” (235). As he goes on to explain, “I couldn’t believe that the English language was mine to use” (235).

Rodriguez also points out a different problem that comes from cultural clashes with school literacy. Though Rodriguez devotes himself to mastering the school standard, there are cultural subtleties that prevent him from feeling included:

For although I was a very good student, I was also a very bad student. I was a “scholarship boy,” a certain kind of scholarship boy. Always successful, I was always unconfident. Exhilarated by my progress. Sad. I became the prized

student—anxious and eager to learn. Too eager, too anxious—an imitative and unoriginal pupil (44).

These stories reverse the meaning of school literacy typically presented in narratives about social elevation. Rather than viewed as a savior to social ills, school literacy is seen as an oppressive force that perpetuates social injustices. Many scholars support this criticism of literacy as defined through a school standard. Gallego and Hollingsworth have compiled some of the research arguing that the social elevation associated with school literacy is a myth:

Students who have mastered school literacy (as the ability to read and write standard English) are supposed to develop into a society of adult citizens who are “innovative, achievement oriented, productive, cosmopolitical, media and politically aware, more globally (nationally and internationally) and less locally-oriented, with more liberal and human social attitudes, less likely to commit a crime, and more likely to take education, and the rights and duties of citizenship, seriously” (Gallego and Hollingsworth 5).

Gallego and Hollingsworth outline two critiques of these claims as unrealistic: one is that literacy education is not designed to share power but to preserve it among the elite by institutionalizing their communicative norms (5). The other argument is “that a socially constructed ‘literate bias’ of school knowledge, understood through a standard language, functions to restrict access to knowledge to those students (primarily from the middle and upper classes) who enter the schools ‘already acquainted with school-like literacy tasks and equipped with a positive attitude toward literate culture’” (6). Many authors of literacy narratives do not miss this unspoken agenda. In fact, the desire to

expose this hidden purpose is an exigence shared by many of the authors.

Opposition

Feeling one's home culture devalued also can lead to a surge of pride in one's home culture and a feeling of loss and guilt when pursuing school literacy. The impulse to reject the school standard puts one in an awkward position when trying to learn it. Lisa Delpit warns teachers of this classroom dynamic: "Students who appear to be unable to learn are in many instances choosing to 'not-learn,' as Kohl puts it, choosing to maintain their sense of identity in the face of what they perceive as a painful choice between allegiance to 'them' or 'us.'" (249).

This tension is played out dramatically in *Voices of the Self: A Study of Language Competence*. Linguistic scholar Keith Gilyard describes how he, an African American, resisted his all-white classmates when introduced to them: "They cannot meet Keith now. I will put someone else together for them and he will be their classmate until further notice. And from that day on, through all my years in public school, all White folks had to call me Raymond" (43). Though Gilyard succeeded in mastering the school standard, his opposition was always present. And he feels compelled to speak up for those who stuck with their instinct to resist schooled literacy:

What has been commonly referred to by educators as "failure" to learn Standard English is more accurately termed an act of resistance: Black students affirming, through Black English, their sense of self in the face of a school system and society that deny the same (164).

Other composition scholars confirm Gilyard's insights. Lisle and Mano's students echo his sentiments: "School experience has taught some [of their students] that their home language is somehow deficient or incorrect; these students often worry that gaining proficiency in academic English constitutes a betrayal of family and community" (21). Many downstream effects come from the assumption of school literacy as the appropriate standard for participating in the commerce of mainstream communication. The impact is usually first noticeable in relation to one's community, as recounted in these stories. This tension often plays out as a challenge to the attitude that only one standard for being literate exists.

Community Literacy

A desire to connect with the literacy practices of one's community is documented in literacy narratives. Responding to institutional pressure to follow a school standard that devalues one's home culture, characters frequently cleave to the communicative patterns in their home environment. For instance, Eliza Doolittle invokes her former community literacy when challenging the role ascribed to her as a literate lady. She uses dialect to launch her critique of her teacher, Henry Higgins: "That's done you, Enry Iggins, it az. Now I don't care...for your bullying and your big talk" (131-32). In these cases, the meaning of literacy shifts away from school lessons that are measurable and transferable to a skill that is context dependent, shaped by one's ability to share in the cultural and economic life of a social group (see Brandt "Literacy"). As previously pointed out by Gilyard, allegiance to one's community can be portrayed as failing in school. Sticking to the familiar language of one's home could also keep individuals from

venturing outside of their communities, maintaining the status and pride they enjoy in that environment. But literacy narratives document movement into new linguistic communities, where new roles are tried on. Though the specter of schooled literacy looms in nearly all literacy narratives, many of these stories present a standard derived from the expression of the narrator's community.

Jimmy Santiago Baca uses the meaning of literacy he sees in his community as the guiding aesthetic for his writing. He describes his community's literacy poetically: "The language of barrio life is made of elemental images. Two birds clash in midair; a man snaps his fingers to a song of love won and lost; and the earth trembles, souls change in the daylight dark. This is the poetry I mine, of my people and my place" (28). This empowered stance puts Baca's voice among mainstream literacy. Articulating a perspective of his minority culture, Baca becomes a poet and essayist in the wider culture. And Baca accepts the accompanying essentialized status that comes with using the literacy he defines as from his community: "I must speak for the many whose voices will not be heard in the official Quincentennial [anniversary of Columbus' arrival] clamor, above the riot of mindless celebrations, moneymaking and electioneering" (97). The literacy Baca pulls from his community labels him a Chicano writer, empowering his role in his community but limiting his status to that of a minority representative.

Other authors use community literacy as a counterbalance to the hegemony of school literacy, emphasizing the value of fitting in with groups considered outside of the mainstream. Narrators who retain an appreciation for their community's standards also retain some of the empowered status they enjoyed in that community. But the power relations between school and community standards qualify their entitlement. The muscle

they exert as masters of their community's literacy is only felt in opposition to the school standard. Ultimately, communicative power is once again determined by the dominant literacy.

In *Bootstraps*, Victor Villanueva wields the power he possesses as master of his community's literacy. In one scene, he compares his English Literature teacher, Mrs. Miller, to the women from his neighborhood:

Mrs. Miller was straight, not tough and funny like Mrs. Roach, Irving's mom, or like Mrs. Washington, Butch's mom, or the other moms that hung out on the stoop in summer: "Hey, you. You! Little Spanish boy. You better get out of that street when there's a car comin', or your momma gonna come down and whoop the rice and beans right outa you." No such talk from Mrs. Miller [their teacher]. She would address us as Mr. Scriva and Mr. Jackson and Mr. Villa-nu-eva. We could appreciate the respect. But there could have been respect *and* some acknowledgment of our ways of having to live in Bed-Stuy. Not one of us could imagine her saying "Spanish boy" or "pretty little nigger." We talked about it. She was not of the block (2-3).

Villanueva realizes that he and his friends can judge the literacy of his teacher from their own community's standards. This judgment is especially empowering to the narrator since he values mastery of different linguistic environments. Villanueva describes how his neighborhood friends admire his ability to code-switch: "Papo, Manny, would wonder aloud how Papi [narrator Villanueva] could 'talk-the-talk and walk-the-walk' and still be 'so white' in private and do so well in school" (5).

When Villanueva moves from New York to Los Angeles, his community changes, as does its standards. Now living among Mexican Americans, Villanueva's father reminds him that their family has different standards: "All this talk about dialects is bullshit. Those Mexicans don't talk *dialects*. They talk their own language, a mishmash of Spanish and Indian. We [Puerto Ricans] speak *Castiliano* [which he would pronounce cath-til-yano], *real* Spanish, like the kings of Spain" (40). Villanueva was taught that Mexicans were not kin to Puerto Ricans, "an assertion that the Chicanos and the Vatos made clear at my failed attempts to join the community" (41). Left with a diminished sense of community belonging, Villanueva feels forced into a lonely, generic identity he associates with school literacy: "Racelessness, then, is the decision to go it alone. And it is most clearly marked linguistically, sometimes even by denying that one is choosing to learn to speak white English, by asserting that one is choosing to speak 'correct' English" (40). Part of Villanueva's literacy story is lamenting the power he lost when disconnecting from his community's literacy: "In a sense, I was pushed into racelessness in California. I had been set up not to establish a fictive kinship with Chicanos" (40). Without a sense of community to help him define an alternative literacy, Villanueva painfully adopts a schooled literacy his teachers praise him for.

Keith Gilyard articulates a similar appreciation for community literacy standards in *Voices of the Self*. His narrator changes names when in school to preserve his community identity. His story traces Raymond's development at school and Keith's life with his friends and family: "[D]ue to adroit impression management, I had been able to give convincing performances before both school and street audiences" (110). Though he enjoys the empowered position of fitting into either environment, the tension between

these roles was not always easy to resolve, forcing him to choose an alliance: “The one belief I held above all others, including the one of ‘destiny,’ was that I should fit in with my community peers, which meant adopting their value system and, in fact, helping to develop it” (110). Gilyard describes the complex relationship between the different types of literacy he had acquired: “The interplay of school culture and street mores would continue to be a drama of rather intense ambivalence for me” (112). For Gilyard, the community standard remains part of him and separate from the schooled literacy he continues to learn.

Likewise, Ellen Tashie Frisina highlights the importance of her family’s language and traditions in her piece, “See Spot Run: Teaching My Grandmother to Read.” Frisina describes trying to teach her grandmother school literacy as a gift for the ethnic heritage she learned from her grandmother: “It was a slight repayment for all she taught me” (141). The value of the lessons she got in school could not compare to her grandmother’s expression of Greek culture.

Frederick Douglass also expresses poignant appreciation—even longing—for the language of the illiterate slaves he heard. Douglass acknowledges the communicative power of the language shared among slaves in song. He describes these songs as a pure expression of the slave community, composed and sung at the same time, expressing the profound emotion associated with their condition. Slavery produced a community language, “words which to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves” (31). Douglass ascribes profound value to the utterances of this group who were kept from learning to read and write: “I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some

minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do” (31). Though Douglass learns the written literacy associated with school, those songs communicate in a way he cannot in writing. Trying to describe the slaves’ meaning, instead, brings tears to his eyes in an “ineffable sadness” (32). He appeals to the voices of slaves to make his point: “If any one wishes to be impressed with the soul-killing effects of slavery, let him go to Colonel Lloyd’s plantation, and, on allowance-day, place himself in the deep pine woods, and there let him, in silence, analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of his soul” (32).

These authors provide ways to think of community literacy as a method of empowerment. Being literate means fitting in with the communicative practices that surround a speaker or writer. Viewing one’s community as possessing a valid form of expression, one has the possibility of always feeling authoritative and included in at least one valued form of literacy. Variety in communities leads to multiple literacy practices. Joseph Harris points out that “one is always *simultaneously* a part of several discourses, several communities” (19), arguing for critical attention to one’s position within the groups to which one already belongs. According to these authors of literacy narratives, articulating appreciation for the communicative standards of a community places one in an empowered position. The narrator claims authority over one community while demonstrating fluency with school-educated readers.

In seeking to understand community literacy, researchers have found validation for standards particular to certain groups. Especially prevalent is writing about the distinct cultural influences that affect language use for African Americans. For instance, the authors of *Literacy in African American Communities* present findings that mother-

child relationships, ministers' sermons, and types of narratives children learn are among the influences that shape different community standards. In an effort to empower these communities, Shirley Brice Heath points out that community standards are measurable, but schools have selected a different set of criteria to test (xvi).

What is most helpful concerning my study of literacy narratives for research on community literacy is the emerging criteria for alternative definitions of literacy. In these stories, the narrators are somewhat constricted when defining themselves within the literacy of their communities. Since the community standard in most cases arises out of a reaction to the dominant, school criteria, the power of one's community is automatically limited. And though empowered with membership in the group, their community literacy leaves them with the generic label of that group. This might allow them to become productive advocates, but it also can lead to the limitations of stereotypes. These narrators seem to be caught between a desire for cultural affirmation and an urge to be heard by the powers that judge standardized school correctness. But if cultural expression could be identified with distinct skills, one's identity within a linguistic community can also include specific skills. Heath notices a repertoire of genres, styles, and grammatical understandings in one collection of research on African American linguistic communities (xvi). According to Heath, these skills would become evident if schools tested for range, authenticity, and community validation (xvi). Isolating the skills associated with one's community literacy could allow one to see the composite nature of an individual's use of language. Possessing the literacy of one's community can be especially empowering when one can see how its particular features are expressive and strategic.

Personal Literacy

Stories about personal experience are of course at their core personal. Though literacy narratives pit the narrator against societal forces like school and community, the stories ultimately tell of the effect of these influences on the character. Sometimes they describe transformed, assimilated individuals who have inculcated the school standard. Or, characters feeling pressure to assimilate might become literate in various situations, multi-dialectical, adjusting themselves to the standards expected of them in different situations. In these instances, the narrators are able to use school and community standards to shape their language use. But there is another contending force specific to the narrator's uniquely situated perspective. The life experiences that allow an individual to claim a viewpoint as his or her own also rely on personal literacy, "particular ways of knowing, being, and communicating that honor the strength of the self beyond school and community evaluations" (Gallego and Hollingsworth 15). This standard for literacy is based on how individuals would like to be understood, how well they communicate the way they perceive themselves.

Self-survival

Developing an identity in order to manage through hardship is one manifestation of personal literacy. Frederick Douglass gives a clear example of this theme in his first narrative. For Douglass, literacy becomes a means of self-discovery and esteem. Besides elevating himself above the slave status, his literacy also makes him a specific person.

As he goes from generic slave to subscribing himself “Frederick Douglass,” the narrative’s trajectory is driven by the emerging shape of his identity as a liberated man. In this plot outline, literacy can be seen as constructing the self by giving it voice. “I read [Sheridan’s speeches on Catholic emancipation⁶] over and over again with unabated interest. They gave tongue to interesting thoughts in my soul, which had frequently flashed through my mind, and died for want of utterance” (55). Douglass found his voice once his feelings were understood: “The reading of these documents enabled me to utter my thoughts” (55).

Drama can be supplied by personal literacy when they must overcome an oppressive social condition that does not tolerate the narrator’s perspective. In such stories, literacy is depicted as a survival tool for an individual’s squelched perspective. Sharon Jean Hamilton exemplifies this tension in her autobiographical *My Name’s Not Susie, A Life Transformed by Literacy*. Hamilton endured eighteen moves as a foster child, all before the age of four. She describes her early life as hard to figure out, “paradoxically predictable and unpredictable, safe and dangerous, ethical and deceptive, delightful and tragic” (xiii). She saw parallels between her life and the stories her adoptive mother read to her—except in the stories there was a way to understand what went wrong and why (xiii).

Reading and writing, Hamilton claims, helped her bridge from her “scars of abuse, neglect, self-doubt, and self destructive, potentially criminal behavior” into the person she wanted to be (4). Hamilton’s narrator uses literacy to escape the social labels

⁶ Following the Reformation in England and the establishment of the Church of England, legislation was passed which prevented all non-Anglicans from holding public office. Only Anglicans were allowed to vote and sit in parliament. These laws also applied in Ireland even though some 80% of the population were Catholics.

that limited how people viewed her: “Literacy helped me to envision worlds beyond my miserable world and eventually enabled me to recreate my life the way I wanted” (5). Reading helped her shape an image of her life outside of the abuse and neglect she faced. Literacy helped her cultivate a private self “to live beyond the labels that create boundaries” (8).

Authors like Hamilton and Douglass display more tension from personal literacy than many other authors. Richard Rodriguez, for example, describes losing his personal language as he becomes school literate: “One suffers a diminished sense of private individuality by becoming assimilated into public society” (26). Rather than possessing multiple literacies, he characterizes one literacy force as replacing another: “Once I learned public language, it would never be easy to hear familiar family voices again” (28). Instead, he claims to develop a “public individuality” that forces him into a representative role.

Keith Gilyard calls Rodriguez’ tradeoff “cultural suicide.” Gilyard believes that desiring membership in the mainstream through schooled literacy should not lead to self-annihilation: “The eradication of the tongue is not prerequisite to the learning of a second” (161). Instead, Gilyard is guided by the communicative needs of his inner self. He claims that writing has played an important role in his self-development: “In a time of crisis, which essentially means I need to reweave or perhaps just repair or maybe attach a sleeve to the basic fabric of the self, such as how to value impending fatherhood, I can get very busy with a pen” (107). Rather than thinking of literacy acquisition as a skills development process, Gilyard describes it as key to identity formation: “It was largely through conversation that I was able to gauge how the self I expressed in writing was

being received by others, thus enabling me to adjust my self-concept in ways I deemed appropriate, in essence, to create the self I would express in subsequent writing” (108).

Defining a personal standard for how one is understood leads Gilyard to an empowered position. He is able to marshal school and community literacy as he finds them suitable to his expression of self. Baca articulates the power of personal literacy dramatically. Before learning to write, he describes feeling lost:

born into a raging ocean where I swam relentlessly, flailing my arms in hope of rescue, of reaching a shoreline I never sighted. But when I wrote my first words on the page, I felt an island rising beneath my feet like the back of a whale. As more and more words emerged, I could finally rest: I had a place to stand for the first time in my life (6-7).

Baca is no longer a Chicano writer when he defines literacy as self-formation, or re-formation: “Language has the power to transform, to strip you of what is not truly yourself” (36). In this sense, literacy is associated with the genuine expression of an individual. And that person can change as one pursues that “true” self. Baca’s standards provide him boundless agency: “In language I have burned my old selves and improvised myself into a new being. Language has fertilized the womb of my soul with embryos of new being” (36). Baca, like Gilyard, creates his own world from his own language. Being literate, in these cases, means using language to bring out the identity one finds necessary in the situation—often in order to survive.

Modeling

These authors have been able to write down their literacy experiences because of their eventual mastery of the school standard. Their stories are written because of the dramatic tension between the communicative skills they possessed and the literacy they desired, which usually consisted of traditional academic literacy. Regardless of their views on the meaning of the school standards, each story traces the acquisition of them, for we have the proof of that outcome in our hands.

Different external supports assisted these authors in developing new personal ways of expression to help them overcome the cultural obstacles of learning school literacy.⁷ The most common support found in literacy narratives, I believe, is the work of published authors that powerfully influence the characters. Numerous authors claim a changed attitude toward schooled literacy when coming upon literary models that affirm their experiences. Just as Douglass studied *The Columbian Orator*, Baca learned from the works of Neruda, Paz, Sabines, Nemerov, and Hemmingway when he heard fellow Chicano prison inmates read aloud poetry (4). Hearing these poets brought him comfort from societal forces that threatened him (4). Luiz Rodriquez discovered such authors as Piri Thomas, Eldridge Cleaver, and Malcolm X, who wrote about experiences he could identify with. Rodriquez claims *Down These Mean Streets* became his bible (138). In these examples, the text transforms the reader. The narrators become so affected by the written words that they inspire meaning in the readers while also steering the way those messages sound. Many of these accounts describe this change dramatically. Douglass'

⁷ On the effect on students who lack supports, like modeling, see Minarik. Observing the multiple literacies used by her second grade students, Minarik partially attributes their difficulties in acquiring school literacy to “role models that had not shown them that the skills or tools they have used to master drawing, debating, and basketball could be applied to reading and writing within a classroom” (289).

account of discovering himself through language, described above, can also be seen in terms of the influence of a literary model, as Sheridan's book gave tongue to his thoughts (55). Baca says that after hearing other inmates read poetry in Spanish, "[the words] made barrio life come alive for me in the fullness of its vitality. I began to learn my own language, the bilingual words and phrases explaining to me my place in the universe" (5).

Another support commonly described in literacy narratives are teachers who connected with the narrator's perspective. In these stories, typically there is a teacher who stands out from the rest, who does not limit classroom communication to school literacy. These teachers are especially valued because of their ability to understand or show interest in the literacies possessed by students. For example, Victor Villenueva begins his story of appreciating literacy from Mr. Del Maestro, who "knows the world—and he understands the block, *el bloque*, what kids today call 'the hood'" (2). Mike Rose learned from Jack MacFarland as he taught "his heart out" bringing canonical literature into his students' lives: "He slowly and carefully built up our knowledge of Western intellectual history" (32). MacFarland engaged his students in a way that brought the language of books into their possession: "We wrote and talked, wrote and talked. The man immersed us in language" (32).

Others describe a supportive home environment for encouraging a form of personal literacy that led to learning the school standard. Paule Marshall identifies her major literary influences as the women from her childhood neighborhood: "They taught me my first lesson in the narrative art. They trained my ear. They set a standard of excellence" (152).

Just as with literary models, live models shape language use as they inspire it. Mike Rose describes the influence of one of his teachers on his writing voice. Having difficulty writing out his ideas for a literature course, Rose's instructor worked with him to make sense of his sentences. Dr Erlandson would read aloud one of Rose's sentences, then rephrase it to make sense to him. According to Rose, he would go back and forth between print and voice, "making me breathe my prose" (55). Rose admired the way his teacher retooled his sentences, "until it all slowly, slowly began to work itself into the way I shaped language" (56).

Authenticity

Though the literacy stories I studied document success due to external supports from books, teachers, friends, and relatives, they also identify internal supports from inner strengths striving for the literacies they desire. These self-supports are often described in terms of an inner or true self that knows what it wants and will sacrifice for that end goal. For example, Victor Villeneuve draws confidence from an image of himself as the successful immigrant. He even uses the third person to describe this persona, allowing him objective commentary on this distinct quality in himself. His American can-do, survival spirit is what pulled him through. He had to succeed.

For Frederick Douglass, this internal strength comes in the form of faith in God. When Douglass gets to the point in his story when he moves to Baltimore and learns how to read, he describes his fortune as an act of God. At the risk of appearing boastful, he claims divine Providence in his favor: "I prefer to be true to myself, even at the hazard of ridicule from others, rather than to be false, and incur my own abhorrence" (47).

Douglass' faith in God generates faith in himself, a strength that allows him to overcome immense odds in pursuing freedom through schooled literacy.

Richard Wright describes his interest in books as driven by a deep hunger. He knows no other African Americans who read the same books as he. He shares his thoughts about Menken and Dreiser and Lewis with no one. But denying the knowledge he received from books would violate his life. Wright describes being directed by an inner self: "All of my life had shaped me to live by my own feelings and thoughts" (298). Viewing himself as essentially committed to understanding racial injustices, Wright finds internal support for his decision to further develop his literary intellect and move North.

Maxine Hong Kingston also dramatizes a personal literacy standard in her autobiography. Growing up female, with Chinese parents, attending an American school, the narrator in *The Woman Warrior* defaults to silence. Her mother cut her tongue at birth to allow her to move in any language. Instead, she is silent. It does not even occur to her to talk in school. When she realizes she has to talk to pass kindergarten, she is miserable bringing out her voice. And the voice that comes out is not authentic. It is constructed with difficulty and objectified by the narrator. She describes reading aloud in first grade and hearing "the barest whisper with little squeaks come out of my throat. 'Louder,' said the teacher, who scared *the voice* away again" [My emphasis added.] (193).

But inside the silence an expression was germinating. In kindergarten, when she painted layers of black over all her school pictures, she describes, "making a stage curtain, and it was the moment before the curtain parted or rose" (192). But the teacher was disturbed and called in her parents who could not understand the teacher but brought

home the pictures for her to “spread them out (so black and full of possibilities) and pretended the curtains were swinging open, flying up, one after another, sunlight underneath, mighty operas” (192).

Silence possessed her even in the Chinese school she attended after the American school let out. She describes the voice that reaches her Chinese class as “a crippled animal running on broken legs. You could hear splinters in my voice, bones rubbing jagged against one another” (196). Kingston’s narrator describes a cultural displacement that prevents her true voice from emerging: “Sometimes I hated the ghosts [white Americans] for not letting us talk. Sometimes I hated the secrecy of the Chinese” (213). She describes her voice as an entity needing a place to go. Besides being misunderstood in school speaking English, she claims, “You can’t trust your voice to the Chinese, either; they want to capture your voice for their own use. They want to fix up your tongue to speak for them” (196).

Other Chinese-American girls were also silent, demonstrating a similar cultural displacement. Kingston’s narrator says, “Normal Chinese women’s voices are strong and bossy. We American-Chinese girls had to whisper to make ourselves American-feminine” (200). Constructing her own American-feminine personality brings a pain to her throat. But beneath the silence and whispery voice her own ideas are building up. She describes trying to tell her mother these true feelings “so that she would know the true things about me and to stop the pain in my throat” (229), but her mother dismisses her comments as gibberish. Then one day her throat “burst open,” and she screamed at her mother and father what she felt was most important about herself (233-5). But her mother shouts back through her outburst; her parents cannot hear her, and she realizes

that she has to be her own audience for understanding herself: “No higher listener. No listener but myself” (237).

Kingston’s narrator hears herself when her throat bursts open. Hearing her true voice, she is not afraid to talk and finds new shape to her identity. Instead of seeing herself as bilingual, she wonders who else talks like her (239). Her confident voice gives her the strength to understand the world anew, since she realizes that the standard to guide her true voice is built into her being: “The throat pain always returns...unless I tell what I really think” (239).

Conclusion

The dramas presented in my sample differ depending upon the type of literacy being sought. But the tension in pursuing any form of literacy is initiated by the pressure to eventually learn the mainstream standards of school. Dramatic tension increases the more distant one feels from the mainstream culture that produces the school standard. Writing the story collapses that space and unites the literate with the illiterate, satisfying an American understanding of literacy issues (Brodkey “Tropics” 47-53). What emerges by the end of the story is a new literate self, sometimes a bit bruised in the process but always more empowered. This new self takes on an American ethos as well, fitting into the mainstream literary tradition. Autobiography has a distinct claim in American culture, given its young history and relatively fluid society. According to Thomas Couser in his *American Autobiography*, American writers have been “thrown back on themselves as the ultimate literary resource, and on individual experience as the ultimate test of

significance and value” (4). Literacy narratives demonstrate this supposedly American trait through personal triumph over obstacles to literacy.

In the light of literacy narratives, literacy cannot be seen as a fixed term. Its meaning is derived from the social status one achieves by demonstrating fluency with a group, particularly the privileged status enjoyed by the academic community that represents schooled literacy. So pervasive is this attitude that educators who perceive themselves as reaching out to their students cannot often see the privileged positions they assume or the ideological biases of their supposedly objective fields.⁸ Literacy narratives expose the ramifications of this tacit, oppressive view of school literacy. Characters not among the privileged group learn in various ways how to develop voices that are acceptable: to the judges of mainstream correctness, to their home communities, and to themselves—sometimes all three.

In her study of literacy in the lives of three adults, Lorri Neilsen discovers similar overlap in conceptions of literacy. Neilsen found subjects who expressed no cultural obstacles to learning the school standard but each embodied distinct definitions of literacy: “All were literate, but each thought, wrote, read, and spoke about numbers and words in ways that were as different as a genetic code or a fingerprint” (10). In observing their daily lives, Neilsen saw how specific literacy practices are particular to an individual’s life. “The individual demonstrates literate behavior that is consistent with his or her world view, personality, self-concept, and experience” (135). Both Neilsen and authors of literacy narratives describe a process of becoming literate as navigating the

⁸ Linda Brodkey, in “On the Subjects of Class and Gender in ‘The Literacy Letters,’” studies correspondence between graduate students and Adult Basic Education students. Her research reveals the teachers “frenetically protected educational discourse from class, and in their respective refusals to admit class concerns into the letters, they first distanced and then alienated themselves from their correspondents” (140). Also see Berlin in Note 3.

meanings that surround one's life in a way that makes one empowered in those contexts. As Neilsen puts it, "[Literacy] is a lifelong process of learning to read and create contextual signs in print and in society. Literacy has many houses, each of which we can learn to make our home" (10).

Surveying the genre of literacy narratives, one can see the problem-solution dynamic played out in these stories. The problem, how to reach the literacy group one desires, is usually presented in the realm of school literacy. Feelings of rejection from the group or reluctance to join the group are common when facing exclusive academic standards. And the solution, how one finds a way into the group, is often realized through personal literacy. The genre can be seen as a general testimony to the empowering potential in cultivating a language to call one's own.

Chapter 5: Literacy Narratives in the Classroom, Advantages and Disadvantages

Scholars devoted to multicultural education have made it their project to promote pedagogies that account for and appreciate the differences among everyone in the classroom. Students arrive on campus with many perceptions of how they differ from the school community. Pedagogies influenced by multicultural studies would ideally relieve this alienation by making students see how their differences fit into the course work. In composition studies, teachers need to be aware of the many factors that make students feel that their familiar use of language will not be valued by college professors. This attention to the student's perceived position in relation to the academic realm suggests that the beginning point for teaching is next to the student. Lisle and Mano, in their vision of a multicultural rhetoric, argue that students should be given opportunities to write about their cultural heritages and identities to make them feel more comfortable writing in a college setting (21). Unavoidably, students must develop their "academic voices" out of the identities they bring with them to college. But teachers who focus on the contexts that produce the students' voices gesture invitingly for them to find their place in classroom discourses. Denise Troutman finds much support among composition theorists for "encouraging students to discover, explore, and develop their authentic voices, because of the confidence and strength that result" (37).⁹

One of the most appealing features of literacy narratives in a writing classroom is its witness to the process of making the transition into a new, more empowering linguistic community. These stories present the students with proof that the struggle to attain a

⁹ Linda Brodkey interweaves a discussion of voice and authority in "Writing on the Bias," highlighting the importance of writing from the authority of one's own experience. The collaborative essay by Beverly Clark (teacher) and Sonja Wiedenhaupt (student) ends with the student thanking the teacher for helping her write: "I don't think it is an easy task to make a student trust their own voice" (71).

desired but foreign form of literacy is manageable. The personal life overcomes the anonymous institution. The personal voice breaks through and makes a claim. Such authors can pull students magnetically with their hard-knocks credibility and educated polish. This ethos can be especially effective on students who are inexperienced and unconfident entering into an academic writing setting.

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

In this chapter, I will discuss how literacy narratives relate to writing classroom pedagogies. Current work in composition studies supports the value of developing community and personal literacies as a way to bring students into academic writing (see Bishop "A Rhetoric"; Couture; and Mutnick). And literacy narratives are recognized for their ability to help students build on the communicative approaches they already

possess.¹⁰ I begin by examining this genre for the opportunities it presents for student writers and also critique its effectiveness as a pedagogical tool. I am particularly concerned about the difficulty students are likely to have identifying with the narrators. The last concern I discuss is the additionally alienating effect this genre has on a student's cultural orality. My intention here is to provide an overview of how well literacy narratives can help students overcome cultural obstacles to writing in college.

Literacy Narratives and Confidence Building

Personal Narrative

The types of writing included under personal narrative are several.¹¹ As a general category, personal narratives are writings that describe the author's life experience. And as a general pedagogical practice, storytelling assignments are thought to turn the classroom toward the student.¹² Personal stories can establish the student writer's authority on the topic and point out lines of argument to develop. But besides the rhetorical assistance narrative provides, scholars in Education have come to embrace the ability of story telling to empower students. According to Carol Witherell and Nel Noddings, "To educate is to take seriously both the quest for life's meaning and the

¹⁰ In her chapter on literacy narratives in *On Writing*, Bishop explains how past experiences with literacy shape the communicators we are and will become. Scott claims that perhaps the most important benefit of excavating past literacy experiences for students is to validate their identities as writers. And Soliday argues that drawing from the students' everyday life through literacy narratives enhances their personal success as writers in the university (522).

¹¹ On distinctions between autobiography, personal essay, and memoir, see Gornick *The Situation and the Story*.

¹² Wendy Hesford argues for students' autobiographical texts in the composition classroom in order to help students and teachers "recognize each student's complex identity negotiations and discursive positions" (149). Lisle and Mano claim personal narrative helps bridge school and academic worlds for students. McEwan and Egan, in their collection of essays on narrative in teaching, find that fostering children's narratives "gives us clues about engaging the imaginations of children from underprivileged backgrounds in educational activities usually inaccessible to them" (xiv).

meaning of individual lives. Through our accounts of uses of stories and personal narratives in education practice, we will explore the centrality of narrative to the kind of work that teachers and counselors do” (3). As teachers, we assist students to make sense of their worlds by having them write about their experiences. Life stories help students get into an analytical mindset useful in academic writing. As Coles explains in his study of narratives as an educational tool, “Stories call us to consider what we know, how we know, and what and whom we care about” (13).

In facilitating a sense of meaning to one’s life, narrative also helps to solidify identity. Coles further claims that “Narrative assists in the formation of a coherent self out of ‘the flux and welter of experience.’ This self may be a personal self or a collective self, and these are given different weighting in different cultural contexts” (80). However the narrator explains her surroundings, she is put in a meaningful relation to the world. According to Witherell, the writer formulates a version of herself while constructing, transmitting, and transforming the culture she inhabits (3).

As a bridge into academic writing, personal narratives make way for the student’s perspective and culture. Specifically, this genre carves room for the student’s voice—which conveys her ideas and influences. Numerous composition scholars attest to the value of retaining a student’s voice in the classroom. Denise Troutman refers to linguistic codes or styles learned from one’s home environment as “authentic voices” which can be intertwined with other voices: “Discovering, grasping control of, and retaining authentic voices, with which writers develop and reinforce who they are, allow students to become confident as writers and as members of a distinct speech community” (36). Keith Gilyard confirms this view with his recommendation that “educators

understand and indicate by their actions the importance of cultural and linguistic pluralism in educational settings” (qtd. in Jamieson 163). Nancy Sommers claims that cultivating the voices that emerge from the students’ home cultures empowers them with a sense of authority: “When [my students] write about their lives, they write with confidence. As soon as they begin to turn their attention toward outside sources, they too lose confidence, defer to the voice of the academy, and write in the voice of Everystudent” (qtd. in Troutman 37). Kermit Campbell echoes Sommers’s sentiments in his claim that “through the use of vernacular forms of discourse like signifying, African American student writers present their most authoritative voices, their most affirmed sense of self in written academic work” (69).

Storytelling engages the world of the narrator with that of the audience. Exchanging stories helps to shape one’s identity in relation to other views present. According to Coles, storytelling “is dialogue that allows the negotiation of meanings through which the self in relation to other selves and to one’s cultural communities is constituted” (7). Not only is one’s difference affirmed in fruitful dialogue, but also what we value as our individual knowledge is often the same for our audience (Coles 7). Dialogue, by its nature, is beneficial to all participants, but, again, it is especially helpful for students whose home cultures have been historically distant from academia. As Mutnick puts it, “the personal narrative as an instruction mode is especially important in that it can give voice to these new *non*writers, making the classroom a more dialogic space and inserting the ‘I’ of ordinary working people and their everyday struggles into public discourse” (85). Barbara Couture explains the development of personal identity similarly: “We allow ourselves to believe those ideas that others believe and to value

them because others do, while at the same time we articulate our own beliefs as they both incorporate others' beliefs and values and as they stand against them" (44).

Narrative can also be dialogic with what is unsaid, not just with other participants. Anne Ruggles Gere points out that the personal writing genres tend to emphasize "narratives that carry a certain revelatory kick, that are perceived as breaking pernicious silences" (204). Gere thinks students feel satisfaction bringing out what they know from their lives: "Asking them to draw upon their own lives allows students to see themselves in conscious ways, to enjoy knowing that they know. That visibility enables students to claim their own lives and become protagonists in their own stories" (210). But part of a student's empowerment is choosing what to tell and what to leave out. Because of the potential pain involved in writing about personal experience, we "need to provide students the same opportunity to deploy silence in their writing, to decide what to reveal and conceal" (211). Gere, like Jaqueline Jones Royster, advocates writing with dialogic awareness. Royster believes that when writing or speaking with Others, we need to be "awake and listening": "If we can set aside our rights to exclusivity in our own home cultures, if we can set aside the tendencies that we all have to think too narrowly, we actually leave open an important possibility" (33).

Personal narratives have worked their way into most composition syllabi largely for this confidence-building potential. We accommodate students by allowing them to write about what they know, with the underlying assumption that they will be dying to tell us a story if we are conscientious enough to facilitate it. But amidst the chorus of supporters for the ability of personal narratives to empower students are those who notice the pressure on students to reveal themselves. From the instructor's position, often the

proof of the student's personal voice breaking through into the academic is a described self-revelation. In her analysis of the 1985 essay collection *What Makes Good Writing*, Anne Ruggles Gere finds "student accounts of experiences with infertility, auto accidents, childhood trauma, or divorce receive instructor accolades such as 'moving,' 'powerful', and 'honest.' Here, as in much personal writing, the most highly prized narratives deal with traumatic experiences" (204). Pressure to come up with a personal event that paints an acceptable "revealing" experience is far from empowering. Students may quite possibly see such assignments as invasive.

Ironically, the students intended to benefit most from the open gesture of writing about oneself are perhaps least comforted by such assignments. Since multicultural pedagogies focus on accommodating the wide range of different backgrounds represented in the classroom, recommendations for reaching the students who feel most atypical through narratives that bring the student's "picture of the world" into the classroom, as Maxine Hairston puts it, are in the spirit of empowerment (672). And I believe confidence building comes from the inclusive impulse to provide for students "opportunities to explore and document their own experience, illuminate the borders between the academy and their communities" (Mutnick 91). But the use of personal narratives can quite often backfire, making students feel excluded. When self-disclosure is a class requirement, students who already feel their difference from other students are not likely to feel comforted by describing experiences that highlight their unique backgrounds. This is especially true for those who have horrid tales of abuse and powerlessness: "[S]tudents who are already at emotional risk because their personal

boundaries have been transgressed are put at risk again by composition teachers who are violating those same boundaries” (Herrick 286).

The same discomfort is likely for students from marginalized communities. For students who feel foreign to higher education, there is a risk that the self being disclosed will not be understood or appreciated. bell hooks warns that for minority students, bringing their private home lives into the public classroom is often too great a risk to take (39). Assumptions that all voices have equal recognition ignore the history that “cultural practices dominant in Western societies tend to engulf the voices of those who are marginal and lower-class in that society” (De and Gregory 119). This brings up another difficulty facing students farthest from the academic cultural center: the narrative as a mark of one’s culture. As Herrick points out, “the forms that narratives take are necessarily shaped by the particular culture that produces them. Students from different cultures would, then, be likely to have differing narrative forms operating within their linguistic and rhetorical repertoires” (276). Breaking into a college English class, students are likely to attune their personal stories to the tenor of the class. Wendy Hesford explains such pressure this way: “autobiography cannot simply be exported from one culture or institutional context to another. In multicultural classrooms, we must be careful not to become imperialists in search of universalizing practices” (147).

Further criticism of the use of personal narratives in composition classrooms concerns the impact on students’ identities. Developing an environment where students can openly express their differences through personal stories may frame the class with a false sense of equality, a view of the classroom as “a separate world of its own,” as Linda Brodkey describes it, “in which teachers and students relate to one another undistracted

by the classism, racism, and sexism that rage outside the classroom” (656). Students might feel diminished if social forces they feel present in their lives are not appreciated by the instructor. We cannot assume that “the personal voice can be achieved apart from the individual’s participation in social-material realities,” as Wendy Hesford puts it: “If we do not recognize how students must negotiate their identities in response to perceived power relations and teacher expectations, we risk dismissing the complexities and struggles involved in writing autobiography within the academy” (134).

Sandra Jamieson accounts for our failure to empower some students, at least in part, to the ways students’ identities are shaped in the classroom. The models presented in many composition readers present students with a narrow range of personas to identify with: “When we select what we consider to be representative models for our students, we must beware that we do not determine their suitability on the basis of subtle stereotypes” (154). For instance, students who feel out of place in higher education are likely to identify with readings that cast them as “victims” or “failures.” Citing Hashimoto, Jamieson points out that “much pedagogy tends to construct our students as failed writers so that we can ‘save them’” (153). For students who feel their backgrounds identify them as “at risk,” personal narratives can become a demoralizing demonstration of stereotypes.

Literacy Narratives

One way to exploit the most confidence-building features of the personal narrative genre is through literacy narratives. Reading and writing literacy narratives offer several ways for inexperienced writers to position themselves proudly among their classmates. Literacy narratives provide examples for how one can move into a new

language world. Rather than falling into stereotypical roles, the narrator demonstrates through this movement empowering ways to define oneself, paths students can use when drafting their own literacy story. These stories model ways that one's personal use of language can make its way into the formal literacy of a published book. Also, literacy narratives bring into the readers' consciousness unexamined assumptions about their use of language. Awareness of the choices one has made as a communicator in the past can help a student see the potential advantage in making other choices and still call them one's own.

Literacy narratives do not take for granted that assimilation into the academic culture is easy or without cost. Narrative genres in general offer students channels by which to import the meanings of their home cultures into the classroom. Since teachers must respect their students' rights to privacy and their vulnerable positions as uninitiated academics, assigning literacy narratives only requires revealing aspects of students' lives that are relevant to the course. Forcing them to examine the ways in which their pasts have influenced the communicators they have become suggests the difficulty and/or accessibility of moving into higher education. But the portrait is, of course, in their hands. How they position themselves in relation to the literacies taught in school is up to them. And by the time anyone has graduated from high school there are surely literacy experiences that would range from the classroom to the street.

Mary Soliday has come out as a strong champion for literacy narratives, given their ability to bridge student and school worlds. In *Writing in Multicultural Settings*, Soliday suggests the use of literacy narratives to "initiate" students into academic discourse (272). Soliday finds that reading and writing literacy narratives help students

reveal how feeling different or feeling pressure to assimilate has influenced their learning experiences (261). Exposing these stories, Soliday believes, will benefit both student and teacher by discovering “generative points of contact between the life and language of school and that of work, family, church, and so forth” (270). Elsewhere, Soliday suggests the value of literacy narratives as examples of transition between language worlds: “Literacy stories can give writers from diverse cultures a way to view their experience with language as unusual or strange. By foregrounding their acquisition and use of language as a strange and not a natural process, authors of literacy narratives have the opportunity to explore the profound cultural force language exerts in their everyday lives” (511). Through writing in this genre, students can interpret or translate their experience to suit their position as a student.

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

narratives can offer students a chance to adjust their self-images to place themselves comfortably within their new academic community.

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

Though literacy narratives typically portray the connection between marginalized communities and mainstream literacies, they are not beneficial only to students who feel alienated in school, nor should they be conceived as assignments suited for "at-risk" students. The concerns they address for how one "fits in" are appropriate for any collegiate newcomer. Some may just need more assurance than others. But there is benefit for all students in observing these differences. According to Mutnick, "Such student writing is...a potential source of knowledge about realities that are frequently misrepresented, diluted or altogether absent in mainstream depictions" (84). All students,

regardless of background, can benefit from the cultural repository made available through such writings (85).

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

Understanding how one is culturally scripted not only affirms one’s identity but also critiques its limitations (65). Literacy narratives introduce in a concrete, familiar form many complex issues concerning the social construction of meaning. By putting the subject matter in the students’ domains, this genre forces students into “understand[ing] their own histories and cultural practices within communities (Kelly 246). This self-analysis can challenge students to see themselves and the people they have learned from

in wider arenas of discourse. Such awareness can enable an individual to use this autobiographical form to shape new social spaces for the people he or she identifies with (Mutnick 82).

Imitation

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

Getting teachers to accept imitative practices in the classroom is not easy, though. Compositionists today are reluctant to use imitation. In 1980, Paul Eschholz's contribution to the widely distributed *Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition* states that "Writers can best learn from what other writers have done when they find themselves in similar situations. Teachers (as well as students) need to read with a writer's eye and to develop a file of models that can be used in their own writing as well as in their teaching" (36). But his advice was dropped in the 2001 update of approaches to composition, *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies*, which devotes nothing to prose models or imitation. Frank Farmer points out in his latest book that imitation has long been discredited by composition teachers ever since "our wholesale rejection of formalism, behaviorism, and empiricism" (73). But he also notes that, ironically, many

rhetoric and composition scholars champion the usefulness of imitation in the teaching of writing (73). Overlooked in several ways for its value, imitation is justified in coming down from the theoretical realm and influencing our classroom practices. Advocates of classical rhetoric believe that imitation can assist writers in a number of ways. Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee point out in their textbook *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*, “imitators may borrow the structures used in the imitated sentence, supplying their own material, or they may try to render the gist of the original passage in other words” (295).

Much of the trust put into pedagogies that use imitation is indebted to the work of Quintilian, the important classical educator (first century). In four volumes, Quintilian lays out detailed instruction on how to raise the perfect citizen-orator. His approach relies on the power of imitation. Because we learn how to speak by modeling those around us, Quintilian puts careful attention on one’s influences. Much of his curriculum focuses on deliberate imitation of great speakers.

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

Teachers throughout the ages have been influenced by Quintilian's attitude toward

students' skills and have used imitation as a standard part of instruction.¹³ For centuries, teachers believed, like Quintilian, that to become an effective speaker one must imitate the greatest orators. This approach for training speakers transferred easily to writing instruction. Today, writing students are trained by the canonical works of such writers as George Orwell, Wayne Booth, and Maxine Hong Kingston found in many composition readers, also with the idea that their example will be passed along. As William Strunk, Jr. and E. B. White put it in their best-selling handbook, "The infant imitates the sounds made by its parents; the child imitates first the spoken language, then the stuff of books" (70).

But besides providing assistance in forming sentences, imitation plays a role in the way we develop our voices since the interactive nature of language makes imitation unavoidable. The influence of Mikhail Bakhtin upon composition theorists has helped bring out the process of using the language of others to develop our own. As Charles Schuster explains Bakhtin, "Words come to us from other speakers; our job is to lay claim to this verbal property" (459). We depend upon imitation not only in the sense that we learn from examples in context; we automatically use the language of those we engage with in order to communicate at any moment. Farmer explains that "the unconscious imitation of another's words is crucial to the continuance of any dialogue with those words. To maintain and to further dialogue, therefore, we must first know how to speak the words of another as a requisite for dialogue with the other" (76). There is always a simultaneous back and forth between the position one assumes and the way

¹³ The works of both Quintilian and Cicero dominated the teaching of rhetoric in English schools during the sixteenth-eighteenth centuries. Quintilian, who devoted his career to teaching rhetoric, believed that facility with speech largely depends upon the combined skills of listening and imitating.

one's audience speaks: "The writer continually audits and pushes against a language that would render him 'like everyone else' and mimics the language and interpretive system of the privileged community" (Bartholomae 91). In establishing one's position within the discourse community, one "must come to know that word, as it were, from the inside out" (Bartholomae 91).

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

Imitation and Literacy Narratives

Literacy narratives prepare students well for practicing imitation. Not only do they offer models students might want to emulate, but they also describe the benefit of imitating others. Frequently, characters describe the use of imitation to achieve their

literacy goals. Students who see a character they respect practicing imitation might naturally see themselves as next in line.

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

Working with one’s literacy role models can also be empowering in the way it

establishes community with respected company. Identification bonds are likely to come easy with those whom one admires. Students form a group with the models they introduce as influences and styles to be imitated. Deborah Mutnick points out that when this group is historically marginalized, speaking for the group as a representative member can be strategic. “[T]hough identity is mainly constructed and always multiplicitous, [many theorists] have nonetheless opted for a ‘strategic essentialism’ that recognizes the need to identify with and/or as members of groups struggling to speak and write themselves into history. The articulation of ‘I’ and the autobiographical impulse, in this sense, are never purely individual acts in that they insert the writer into public discourse, creating new social spaces for all group members” (81-82). Establishing identification with role models through literacy narratives allows for opportunities to advocate for an esteemed group.

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

But imitation does not mean just trying to sound like someone else or even borrowing their strategies. Imitation can involve a more personal devotion to those being

admired. Barbara Couture believes imitation is most valuable when it moves into emulation: “Writers need to know quite a bit about what it is that others *do* when they communicate in writing so that they can act like them and, perhaps equally important, *be* like them in order to occupy a common field within which each other’s communications are heard and understood” (42). Couture suggests that by emulating other writers one can reach common ground with them. One’s personal literacy, as a subject, makes such level ground attainable. Awareness of how other writers moved toward academic literacy puts the student’s story in relation to the rest. Jacqueline Royster suggests in the “awake and listening” mindset, one should adopt an equivalent status to other communicators when writing or speaking (33). Following the examples of other literacy narratives can make the student realize how much better we communicate when we pay attention to others.

There is a strong case for using literacy narratives in the writing classroom. They model successful achievement of schooled literacy. They allow students who feel alienated by academia to identify with issues of disenfranchisement dramatized in the stories. They give a student examples of how language can transform one’s life, a model any student then has the option to follow. However, there are a number of ways that this genre can hinder student progress in the classroom. Where some students might find comfort in this genre, others are likely to encounter distress.

Literacy Narratives and Student Alienation

Lack of Identification

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

Educators might be well-guided by recalling the historical skepticism of professional writers instructing novice writers. The specialized skill of persuading others has throughout history been viewed with mistrust, a cunning “knack” according to Plato. The practice of manipulating words brings to mind self-serving ends in the author. Just as we view askance political “spin-masters” these days, Plato questions the motives of a famous teacher of rhetoric in his book *Gorgias*: “Will you [Gorgias] then, if [your pupil] comes to you ignorant of [knowledge on a topic] enable him to acquire a popular reputation for knowledge and goodness when in fact he possesses neither, or will you be quite unable to teach him oratory at all unless he knows the truth about these things beforehand?” (39). Plato’s implication is that teachers of rhetoric pretend they have expert knowledge on a topic in order to demonstrate persuasive skills. Part of the

student's education is to catch on to the game of acting as if he knows something he actually doesn't. But from the student's point of view, until you are on the inside, sharing your skills with the other pretenders, the teacher's discourse appears foreign in every way.

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

These days, skepticism of the writing teacher is framed in the context of power dynamics. Students who sit in class hoping one day to join the educated graduates must trust that the teacher has an interest in letting them into that group. Trusting that the teacher's power to prevent them from getting "in" asks students to be very generous and naïve about how power is structured in our schools.

Mina Shaughnessy validates the distrust students are likely to have of their writing teachers. She describes how teachers of basic writers are likely to view their students as "natives" needing "conversion": "Sensing no need to relate what [the writing

instructor] is teaching to what his students know...the teacher becomes a mechanic of the sentence, the paragraph, and the essay.” Shaughnessy suggests that the worse a student’s skills are perceived to be, the farther the instructor will distance himself. And the teacher’s cover comes in the form, once again, of demonstrated skill: “Drawing usually upon the rules and formulas that were part of his training in composition, he conscientiously presents to his students flawless schemes for achieving order and grammaticality and anatomizes model passages of English prose to uncover, beneath brilliant, unique surfaces, the skeletons of ordinary paragraphs” (292).

David Bartholomae describes the alienating lens through which students perceive teachers as even more insidious. The instructor may have all the best intentions of meeting students on their level by “diving in,” as Shaughnessy recommends, but the divide is part of the structure of academia. Teachers may try to give assignments that accommodate to the students’ interests, but “what these assignments fail to address is the central problem of academic writing, where a student must assume the right of speaking to someone who knows more about [the subject] than the student does...” (595). The instructor is in the privileged position of presiding over the information. Or, as Plato might put it, appearing to know more. Bartholomae is bringing up a different point though. The writing instructor represents the possessor of the language of power. And the student must “see herself within a privileged discourse, one that already includes and excludes groups of readers. She must be either equal to or more powerful than those she would address. The writing, then, must somehow transform the political and social relationships between students and teachers” (594). Bartholomae points out the

impossible position of the student: acting as if she is part of the group she is separated from--because of her apprentice status.

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

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

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

Subordination of Cultural Orality

Literacy narratives treat the acquisition of written language as a goal, if not a triumph. The dramatic tension in these stories is driven by the desire or necessity of school literacy. These stories have set a precedent for venerating written communication.

The importance of achieving schooled literacy has been narrated into the Western tradition as part of the individualist's drive for "making it." In George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, Eliza Doolittle ascends from a lower-class flower girl to an up-scale flower merchant by adopting the dialect of the literate British upper class. Countless American autobiographies describe education as a key component to becoming self-made.

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

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

So, where does the esteemed status of written literacy leave the oral communication of one's community? Silenced, according to Scollon and Scollon. These researchers, who studied interethnic communication in Alaska, find that Athabaskans have great difficulty responding to written literacy because of the different consciousness that accompanies an oral culture: "Because learning to read and write in the essayist

manner is in fact learning new patterns of discourse, literacy for an Athabaskan is experienced as a change in ethnicity as well as a change in reality set” (42).

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

Gilyard explains that the privileging of Standard English puts speakers of Black English in the supposed position of needing to learn the school standard for upward mobility. But this argument sets up a dangerous myth of simple assimilation, according to Gilyard: “Social relations are a far more vital factor for Black students in school than differences of language variety. Black children, like all people, make decisions based on vested interests. If they were to perceive that the social dialectic were in their favor, learning another dialect could not be a major problem” (74). Adopting a Standard English dialect becomes a major problem when the cultural value of one’s oral language goes unacknowledged. Quoting Smitherman, Gilyard writes, “teaching strategies which seek only to put white middle-class English into the mouths of black speakers ain’ did nothing to inculcate the black perspective necessary to address the crises in the black community” (74).

But Gilyard falls victim to the hegemony of written literacy despite his recognition of how the oral tradition has been unfairly devalued. Instead of regarding his oral skills for their distinct qualities, he sees them as funding for his writing skills. He explains how practicing his expression in conversation helped him with subsequent writings (108). He consciously developed his ability to write from the oral skills he possessed. This is the case throughout the genre. Repeatedly, these stories portray oral communication as a rehearsal for the more important written expression.

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

Using this genre as a method for initiating students into an unfamiliar composition classroom is likely to further alienate students whose communicative skills come out of an oral tradition. Literacy narratives do not confirm the value of oral expression that does not convert into writing. Cultural influences that shape distinctly oral communicators are not of use when learning the school standard, according to this genre. Instead, literacy narratives air the cultural obstacles and sacrifices that come with learning to

communicate in school, while reinforcing those consequences as inevitable to achieving literacy.

Conclusion

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

All students can benefit from observing the network of influences that produce an individual's view of being literate. The genre puts rhetorical lessons in a wider societal context, a context in which students might be able to place themselves meaningfully. If the message comes through, in observing this genre, that literacy is ultimately shaped by the individual communicator, the pathway becomes open for the student's perspective.

The school standard is likely to look less intimidating when seen as an element used to shape one's voice. Students become empowered when the lessons become personally useful. And since, as Lorri Neilsen points out, "most literate individuals will act out the remainder of their lives in contexts much broader than a schoolroom" (138), all students would benefit from genres that connect personal and social contexts. This is a key ingredient to successful literacy education, according to Neilsen: "When school literacy has little connection to literacy in the broader contexts of life, the chances are great that it cannot promote the development of self-understanding and self-control" (138).

Literacy narratives can provide a meaningful bridge into academic literacy in a number of ways. For those who can identify with the characters, literacy narratives privilege individual experience, provide social context for personal experience, and empower personal literacies. However, they also devalue oral literacies. This genre presumes the hegemony of written literacy. Oral expression is subsumed into the written. The oral part of one's culture becomes annexed as the precursor to writing. Students who follow the examples of this genre must also minimize the contribution of orality to their sense of being literate. Though this approach may not suit students who have a rich tradition in oral expression, literacy narratives document what most schools hope to produce.

Chapter 6: Methodology for a Confidence-Building Pedagogy

When sitting down at my in-laws for a meal, I know there will be an elaborate prayer given before we eat. World events, absent relatives, the weather...sometimes more are covered. I have also seen my father-in-law call upon visitors to the table to lead the blessing. For years, this terrified me. I was raised, at least for a few years, in the Catholic Church. In my family, if we did say grace, it was always the same “Bless us O Lord...” refrain. My dad never went off on tangents into his day’s revelations of thankfulness. My in-laws are career Mennonite missionaries, now living in Lancaster, PA, who frequently host people from their vast international network. I couldn’t imagine coming up with anything close to what I heard around me, so I rehearsed the sentence I learned. But I’ve never been called on to say the grace. My father-in-law must realize that my words would not fit into the specialized literacy of this community of Christians.

When I was in the position of wondering whether I would be asked to say something before the meal, I listened with great interest as the people around me came up with such spontaneous eloquence. And not just at mealtimes. Prayers might spring up when someone is leaving or after a piece of news is heard. And sometimes before large extended family gatherings or before an entire congregation at a church. What confidence, I thought.

It has been thirteen years since I first visited my wife’s family, and I hear their prayers differently now. They represent a community’s literacy that is taught publicly but is habitually practiced privately. Even in public, a prayer appeals to the private. They articulate a personal vantage of one’s creator. What I was hearing at the dinner table was an outpouring of words rehearsed daily to satisfy the believer’s own need to be

understood by God. Of course they came out easily. This is a private language I am overhearing. Of course they speak out with confidence. This is a literacy these people have learned to make their own.

The awe I felt observing these family prayers could apply to anyone who feels outside of a literacy community. I think of my envy as a young student hearing my teachers express themselves so precisely, so completely. I also think of my students trying to sound like the teachers around them. The apprehension I hear in some students' voices or in their slim paragraphs tells me that they are not drawing on a literacy they would call their own. In fact, it sounds more like some students are trying to leave out the personal expression and wait for the language of school to fill them up. This impulse to suppress the personal is most palpable for students who feel their home language judged harshly in a school setting. Students are likely to step with trepidation where their familiar expressions are not used or even appreciated. People are likely to shut off their personal voices when the literacy practiced around them feels alien and impersonal.

In a Tucson, Arizona, high school classroom, a teacher explains the meaning of the standardized test scores as he hands out the results to the students. One student, after receiving a score above the 50th percentile, is so ecstatic he calls out, "Hey! I'm not as dumb as I thought" (Moore and Hinchman 110). This anecdote, from David Moore and Kathleen Hinchman's guide to teaching, suggests the personal and emotional dimensions of students who do not feel that they measure up (110). As Moore and Hinchman explore in their book, "literacy development is entwined with the ways adolescents identify themselves as individuals and learners" (110). Margaret Meek, in her *Achieving*

Literacy: Longitudinal Studies of Adolescents Learning to Read, offers this explanation for why the students she studied appeared to be reluctant, poorly motivated, or failures: “The real condition of these pupils was not lack of desire to learn, or poor basic skills, but absolute conviction that they could not be successful no matter what they did” (214).

A causal link between imposed school literacies and silenced students has become a pedagogical concern in literacy studies. In the late 1980s, a discourse of critical literacy became prominent that challenges the power relations that often situate teachers and students into “us” and “them” categories. This division partially explains the literacy crisis of under-performing American students, according to Catherine Walsh in her 1991 book *Literacy as Praxis: Culture, Language, and Pedagogy*. She believes the low literacy demonstrated in standardized tests by American students, especially poor and minorities, should be addressed by a pedagogy that “gives space to traditionally silenced voices and gives credence to the languages students speak and the cultural and social conditions in which they live and struggle” (19).

One specific element of a critical approach to literacy, as Walsh explains, is an awareness of how meaning is shaped by multiple social conditions in various situations. How one fits into this network of influences is part of the lesson: “These conditions are also fashioned by and mediated through the learners’ own linguistic, cultural, and social observations, interactions and struggles in settings which are by no means monolithic, homogeneous, or static in substance or in composition” (17). Understanding one’s individually situated voice is part of the solution.

Pedagogy influenced by critical approaches to literacy often builds from the need to understand one’s specifically positioned voice, one’s personal literacy. Gallego and

Hollingsworth believe that developing personal literacies is part of the key to reaching out to alienated students: “The historical reality of urban students’ failure to become ‘school literate’ through standardized text-process interactions (Cordtz, 1989) becomes a personally self-fulfilling prophecy, unless educators take personal responsibility for identifying and celebrating community and personal literacies and make available texts that support alternative interpretations of the world” (15-16).

A recent book on how effective schools are at teaching literacy also recommends mining the students’ personal voices to succeed in English/language arts classes. In the chapter “Effective Teachers in an Urban District,” Judith Langer discovers teachers who develop pedagogy based on the desire to assert one’s personal literacy. Detailing different approaches for allowing students to develop their ideas orally, Langer describes how the teachers she encountered “helped students feel comfortable and confident about expressing themselves in front of others” (97). In her study, Langer recommends that students be encouraged through conversation because of its potential for “deeper” meaning: “For many students, including those who may be silenced in various ways by school culture, the study of literature is about gaining confidence in one’s own voice” (96).

My father-in-law has written about a dozen books on his faith journey as a missionary among African Muslims. The comfort he feels bringing out his personal language to the dinner table extends easily to the page. The personal converts routinely into public for him since he feels confident with the language used.

This essay describes an approach to teaching college writing that cultivates students' confidence by allowing them to recognize the rhetorical strengths in the voices they already possess. I am not talking about the blending of home and school dialects, learning to infuse one language use with another. Geneva Smitherman describes this sort of writing as the most difficult she has attempted, using "Black linguistic authenticity" for those who lack "linguistic competence in Ebonics" (9). Instead, I am referring to tapping the sources of one's perceived authenticity and authority as a way to strengthen one's sense of power as a communicator. Borrowing from the concept of literacy narratives, I am suggesting a pedagogy that mines experiences that shape one's skills as a communicator: lessons-learned narratives. This approach has two purposes: one is to bring to light the context of a student's personal literacies by identifying his or her communicative influences; the second is to get each student to consciously lay hands on the language s/he claims to be personal. Together these lessons combine for a single effect: by understanding and developing their personal voices, students can make the institutional standard part of their own.

Though this pedagogy is conceived for students at a historically black university, it is equally applicable for all students since every student must make some transition adapting to their college's culture. What works for one student is likely to work for others since, as James Williams points out, "The universal factors that govern language and learning suggest that writing instruction for nonmainstream students is very similar to writing instruction for mainstream students" (212).

Institutional Context and Student Attitudes

For the past several years I have taught general education requirements in the English department at a medium-sized historically black state university on the East Coast. The student body is currently 95% African American

My assignment has been within a program for admitted students who fail a grammar skills test. My sections meet an extra two hours per week (five hours total) compared to the three hours of classes required for regularly admitted students. The extra class time is meant for covering basic skills, to get them more comfortable with Standard Edited American English.

From 2001 to 2003, I surveyed my English composition students' attitudes toward writing. As part of a pre-writing exercise for a lessons-learned assignment, I prompted them with questions about their communicative influences and their confidence levels. Here are the instructions and questions:

Your first writing assignment is on the topic of communicating. In general, this essay is to get you to notice where your mind goes when you prepare to write or say something. Being aware of what your mind draws on can help you improve your writing as well as make your work easier. The specific task of the assignment is to identify people, events, experiences, or anything from your past that helps your ideas flow. Put into a question, it would read this way: when trying to come up with something to say or write, what from your past gives you the confidence to get your point across?

One method for developing ideas for an essay is to ask yourself questions about the topic. Answer the following questions to generate possible ideas. Practice elaborating and detailing your ideas for each question in the space provided.

1. Does thinking of the way someone else communicates help your words come out smoothly?
2. Is there anyone whom you think of hearing what you want to say that makes communicating easier?
3. Are there any events from your past that make you feel confident as a communicator?
4. Are there any experiences as a writer from your past that give you confidence?
5. What else comes to your mind that assists you when you write?
6. How do you usually feel about doing a writing assignment in English class?

Over half of the 180 responses were negative to the final question. To various degrees, these 127 expressed either dread or resistance to writing assignments. Their responses indicate some of the obstacles they perceive to succeeding with writing in college. Most significantly, students describe a feeling of alienation from the expectations of classroom English. To a lesser degree, they also indicate opposition to the institutional setting imposing the assignments. These reactions are similar to the negative attitudes toward schooled literacy portrayed in literacy narratives, as outlined in Chapter Three. A brief analysis of the responses demonstrates these themes.

Among those who have negative feelings toward school writing, the most common sentiment expressed is alienation due to low grades and criticism received from previous English teachers. Using the space for questions four, five, and six, many explain how they see themselves as weak in English due to the judgments of previous English teachers. Some students indicate their history of poor performances in English class. "I always get bad grades in English," is one typical response. Others remember

the criticism of their teachers: “I have a hard time staying on topic,” or, “a big problem is comma usage and word choice is another problem.” The disaffection these students feel being judged outside of correct classroom English also emerges as low self-esteem in several responses. “I know I am a bad writer” is a common sentiment. Others indicated their trepidation with sentences like, “I usually feel nervous that I won’t do good.” Also noticeable is a resigned sense of powerlessness in being a student writer: “I am very unconfident about my writing. I feel like just getting it done. If it is good it is good and if it isn’t, oh well.”

These findings are hardly new. The connection between lack of success and lack of confidence is played out daily for educators. Also predictable is the resistance to school work that comes with low grades. Among those who mention doing poorly in English class, several make known their disdain for essay writing. Many call it a “waste of time.” Also common in these responses is the complaint that writing assignments do not reflect the students’ interests. Assignments are described as “boring,” “of no interest,” even “stupid.” In some cases, opposition to school literacy becomes defiance. As one student explains, “Usually I feel as though I shouldn’t have to do it.” Eleven students used the word “hate” in reference to essay writing or English class experiences.

What these questionnaires reveal that is not well documented is several positive attitudes toward communicating despite the lack of success in English class. Meaningful communicative influences are indicated in responses to questions one, two, and three, which are aimed at communicating in general not just in writing assignments. Though sixteen students brought up teachers and experiences from high school in this section, twenty two responses mention people and events from the student’s home and

community setting. Family members, pastors, national African American leaders, and friends, are among the influences listed. Two traits are most frequently cited in the people who influenced them. One is their outspokenness. Words such as “courageous,” “dignified,” “strong” are also used to describe the forthright qualities the student writers admire. The other trait is the model’s adaptability. The responses reveal awareness of how the models are able to adjust their communicative styles to different situations. Speaking professionally in one moment then using slang in the next is what several students admire. Here are some examples of their responses:

My mother is very assertive. Thinking of the way she handles things lets me know I can get the job done.

My father talks in a way that always makes it seem like he knows what he’s talking about.

Listening to others helps me especially when the speaker is someone powerful such as Louis Farrakhan or Jesse Jackson.

Only two of these students passed the course, failing to write a majority of their papers up to a passing level.

Some explanation for the gap between positive communicative role models and negative classroom English experiences is suggested in these responses. The literacy models and skills these students have identified from their communities are not reflected in school. Though using the school standard improves one’s social adaptability, the skill being recognized by the students is an oral one. The performative qualities these students admire suggest a divergence between their community and school literacy practices. These students do not naturally connect the two literacy sites; instead they seem to think

of English class as where they must make themselves over, as alienating and frustrating as that process may be.

In *Literacy in American Lives*, Deborah Brandt draws some profound conclusions about the disconnection between school and other literacies in her extensive research into the history of literacy in American lives. Surveying the various social conditions that have produced literate behavior, Brandt points out multiple sources and types of literacy practiced in this country. Brandt applies the lens of how societal agents sponsor literacy-learning to life histories and reveals the complexity of influences surrounding the literacy practices of an individual.

For example, one woman Brandt interviewed recalled learning from her immigrant grandmother in the 1950s that literacy was symbolized by being able to read the newspaper. Since the woman's grandmother could speak Yiddish and English but could write neither, she thought of reading the newspaper as proof of social distinction (192-3). In a contemporary example, Brandt describes how an 11-year-old boy had already written to numerous different audiences: his teachers, his family, his principal, the local community [in a letter to the editor from his scout troop], and one of the clients of his mother's day care service (99-100).

Besides documenting the accumulating forces of literacy sponsorship in American culture, Brandt also details the variety of influences on literate behavior. Like the responses of my students, Brandt's research identifies alternate models of literacy beyond the classroom. American educators are not in sync with the multiplicity of literate activity practiced in this country. According to Brandt, the literacy goals of American educational institutions are out of date, not yet incorporating the variety of literacy forces

present today. Brandt describes the American schools and universities as “promulgating old ways and old reasons for reading and writing that grow further out of step with communication experiences in the surrounding society” (205).

Brandt’s research also connects the development of African American community literacies to the historical exclusion of blacks from school literacy. Throughout the history of American literacy, white mainstream educational institutions have avoided sponsoring African Americans: “As literacy grew more useful for gaining economic advantage, it developed new ideological uses for preserving white skin advantage” (106). As a result, African Americans developed strategies for learning literacy within their own communities: “African Americans have taught and learned literacy within collective self-help systems of long, traditional standing, systems that emphasize spiritual wholeness, reciprocity, resistance, and political activism” (195). Brandt suggests an African American communicative tradition based on community literacies, developed distinctly outside of the school model that judges English correctness.

Geneva Smitherman has devoted much of her career to celebrating the distinctiveness of what she calls black expressive discourse style and arguing for its validity within the literacy standards set in schools. She demonstrates her point in her writing style as she consciously draws from African American literacy traditions, mixing “the language of home with the language of school” (9). Besides finding legitimacy for black discourse styles in academic writing, she also studies the unique orality of African American communicative traditions. For example, she describes these traditions as fitting into a sacred-secular continuum, which she characterizes with specific qualities: “exaggerated language (unusual words, High Talk); mimicry; proverbial statement and

aphoristic phrasing; punning and plays on words; spontaneity and improvisation; image-making and metaphor; braggadocio; indirection (circumlocution, suggestiveness); and tonal semantics” (217).

The responses of my students suggest that their discomfort with essay writing is in part due to the racist history that separated the literacy practices of blacks and whites. They express awareness of the distinct venues of home and school, suggesting for some students distinct literacy practices in each. This seems to be the main difference between those who responded negatively and positively to question six. Students who express positive feelings toward school writing in general admire models and skills closely associated with school literacy. Many of these responses describe teachers or relatives who have helped them with their assignments. Described as authoritative, supportive, and masters of correctness, these models are characterized as ideal. During the semester, these students needed far less assistance with their writing than the previous group I described. Here are some examples of their responses:

When I think of the way my father writes I tend to mimic his style of writing.

Since he is an English teacher I sort of trust his style. Also some of his writings are really well written.

I put words in a way that would be acceptable to my mother. She does not let me speak in improper English, so I don't write like that.

Thinking of the way my Psychology professor speaks helps my words come out smoothly. It sounds like everything she says is pre-recorded. She is very clear and precise.

These particular students produced some of the highest grades in my classes.

Most of the students who have positive attitudes toward school writing recall successful events in school, winning an award or getting high grades, as part of what gives them confidence when writing. But that confidence first comes from the communicative models they have followed. That same confidence might be there for students who feel disaffection toward school literacy, but the models they have followed often are not seen as relevant to a school setting. One key difference in their attitudes and typically their consequent successes is how they conceive of their home and community literacies in relation to the standards of school. This is the issue that has shaped my pedagogical concentration: assisting my students to see the relevance of what they have learned through community literacy practices to writing in college.

A Confidence-Building Pedagogy

As I have pointed out earlier, there are many advantages to using literacy narratives for teaching composition. These stories model ways that one's personal use of language can make its way into the formal literacy of a published book. In moving from one linguistic community into another, the narrators demonstrate empowering ways to define oneself, paths students can use when conceiving their own perspective on literacy. Also, literacy narratives bring into the readers' consciousness unexamined assumptions about their use of language. Awareness of the choices one has made as a communicator in the past can help a student see the potential advantage in making other choices and still calling them one's own. The genre offers a pedagogical tool that is helpful for mining personal literacies.

But what most literacy narratives model is off-point from what unconfident students might find most supportive. The dramatic tension of the stories is driven by the pressure to achieve school literacies. This emphasis might put off students who have had negative experiences with the judgment of standard correctness. The use of literacy narratives for writing class pedagogies also depends on students identifying with the highly literate characters; students must also be able to subsume their orality into written literacy in accepting this genre.

Literacy narratives also may steer students' responses toward pleasing the teacher, especially students who may feel outside of school culture. The emphasis on schooled literacy in literacy narratives may put pressure on students to come up with views of literacy and personal stories that corresponds with the teacher's expectation, the resident expert on school literacies. Or, assignments related to literacy narratives might produce yet another school hoop to be navigated strategically. This was the finding of Hannah Ashley, who studied undergraduate writers from working-class backgrounds who wrote their literary histories as part of a class requirement. Collecting data from interviews, class discussions, listserv contributions, and written assignments, Ashley found student strategies for writing to provide the teacher with what she wanted. These strategies were presented by the students as games or tricks to get by (523). Ashley's subjects were proficient writers who were taking the course to become peer-writing tutors. But if students who are less skilled have the same response to such assignments, they are likely to feel little power as they repeat past performances of trying to game the teacher and miss the confidence-building potential of the genre.

Literacy narratives may fall short in connecting meaningfully with the personal, perhaps especially for persons who feel insecure in school and need reassurance. One way to allow students to feel comfortable in a new communicative situation like college essay writing is to make them realize their expertise in their own expressiveness. Narratives that document movement into *any* linguistic community, not just the academic ones so often written about, have strong potential for reaching the personal. To make use of the promising benefits of the literacy narrative genre as a tool for reaching out to disenfranchised students, I suggest having students read and write about written or oral communicative mastery either in or out of mainstream education experiences. These assignments would bring out the influences that have shaped the student's communication skills: how they've learned what they know. This writing process I believe can build students' confidence by making them conscious of their language skills, their personal literacies.

This model for a confidence-building pedagogy is based on a spatial metaphor of "moving from" the realm of the local, familiar "into" the foreign territory of academia. As writing instructors, we may be suspicious of this assumption since many of the discourses students participate in are already part of what concerns academics. The new student's voice is hardly unfamiliar and without value. My choice of this spatial metaphor is to reflect the student's point of view that perceives itself as alien entering the esteemed doors of higher education. Part of my assumption, then, is that this pedagogy should find a balance between comfort and challenge, representing student's attitudes toward the different spatial positions.

Lessons-learned narratives offer ways for students to move along this path. Reading these narratives allows students to identify with the particular concerns of others learning new communicative skills. Writing about one's lessons learned allows for an opportunity to validate one's own experience with learning to communicate. The genre makes academic writing more accessible both because the students introduce their own teaching influences and also because the final product describes their connection to a form of literacy.

Lessons-learned Narratives

Role models can be an important bridge available to students for adapting to an academic environment. Students often come to college and find motivation to stay based on whom they admire. Then once on campus, students often find new mentors among their teachers and fellow students to help navigate them through to graduation. But not all students share access to role models who can steer them toward academic success. For some students, identifying with professors may seem impossible. Teachers may look and sound very different from those the students have come to admire. This may be especially true for minority students. Lisa Gosalves found in her research that white faculty often fail in their communication with black male students. The white faculty studied refused to engage with their black male students and often ignored cultural and racial content in papers (464).

Students might also be put off if the voices they prize do not exist in the books they encounter in their courses. This kind of disorientation can be costly. Because identity is shaped so strongly by one's linguistic community, failure to identify with

presented models of success, both live and literary, could prevent students from developing positive identities within the academic community. Students are known to become “drop outs” when they feel there is nothing to keep them there (Fine and Rymes). Michelle Fine prefers the term “push outs” to emphasize the student’s lack of agency in an inhospitable environment.

One way to initiate a feeling of connection with a college setting is to allow students to invite the influential people of their lives into the subject matter of the course. Introducing the communicative skills of people the students know and admire is important since, as Lisle and Mano point out, “Students’ families and communities may teach them to express their ideas in ways that make our academic conventions seem alien” (16). Opportunities to cultivate one’s personal relationships and role models inside the context of academic discourse are available through literacy narratives.

Caroline Clark and Carmen Medina, in their study of literacy narratives, discovered that “students came to acknowledge the individuals such as parents, siblings, and teachers involved in their literacy” (69). We may not be conscious of them as role models, but those who “rub off” on us are usually people we admire. Writing a literacy narrative is not necessarily a study of role models. But investigating one’s literacy history is sure to uncover people the writer has been influenced by.

Mike Rose identifies such an influence on his literacy development in his high school English teacher, Mr. MacFarland: “He tapped my old interest in reading and creating stories. He gave me a way to feel special by using my mind. And he provided a role model that wasn’t shaped on physical prowess alone, and something inside me that I wasn’t quite aware of responded to that” (34). Rose explains how MacFarland’s high

praises buoyed his writing confidence and eventually inspired him to attend college.

Reading books borrowed from MacFarland, Rose felt initiated into a new world: “I could browse bohemian bookstores in far-off, mysterious Hollywood; I could go to the Cinema and see events through the lenses of European directors; and, most of all, I could share an evening, talk that talk, with Jack MacFarland, the man I most admired at the time. Knowledge was becoming a bonding agent” (37).

Richard Rodriguez, in his literacy narrative, describes how his admiration of his teachers estranged him from his family: “I began by imitating [my grammar school teachers’] accents, using their diction, trusting their every direction....Memory gently caressed each word of praise bestowed in the classroom so that compliments teachers paid me years ago come quickly to mind even today....The docile, obedient student came home a shrill and precocious son who insisted on correcting and teaching his parents with the remark: ‘My teacher told us....’” (207). For Rodriguez, the influence of his teachers became an instrument to leverage against his feeling of being unappreciated by his family.

Ellen Tashie Frisina, in her description of giving private reading lessons to her grandmother, explains how she matured in this unique role: “My grandmother and I sat patiently side by side—roles reversed as she, with a bit of difficulty, sounded out every word, then read them again, piece by piece, until she understood the short sentences...I felt so proud, so grown up” (140). Through the relationship with her grandmother, Frisina was able to develop a new identity for herself as a literate person: “I took it upon myself to teach my grandmother something, something I already knew how to do. Something with which I could give back to her some to [sic] the things she had taught

me...she had taught me my ethnic heritage” (141). School literacy taught Frisina a new way to relate to and appreciate her grandmother.

To me, these excerpts are examples of lessons learned in the literacy narrative genre. They describe the transmission of a valuable lesson in acquiring a new literacy, school literacy in these cases. Literacy narratives are a kind of personal testimony to the breadth of influences one encounters when learning to use the school standard--parents who read books aloud, teachers who were supportive, characters or plot lines that inspired reading. There are countless potential venues of personal experience to mine—provided one has successful experiences to draw from.

But what about students who don't have positive experiences with accomplishing schooled literacy? Despite the alienation such students might feel in a literacy narrative, they, too, must have had success learning to communicate in some new way. The influences that have shaped these successes are what I am interested in. They might have learned how to get along with one of their relatives, or they might have picked up the way a pop star sings about a broken heart, or figured out how peers talk back to a teacher. These are also communication experiences but ones that would likely be excluded from the literacy narrative genre.

Lessons-learned narratives allow students to introduce who and what they followed in their acquisition of any language skills. These assignments allow students to emphasize the ties to their communities and to their personal relationships. Invoking the individuals the student has been affected by helps affirm his or her identity as part of a literate tradition. Additionally, these subjects provide a tool for analyzing the meaning of that tradition within larger social contexts. They also give students a community base

from which to advocate for being heard by other audiences. The admiration one feels for such influential figures could translate into the exigence needed to speak up for what an individual cares about and is most comfortable with.

This approach brings validation and consciousness to the students' skills, but it also introduces forms of literacy that the teacher has no authority over. As a result, the literacy models brought into the classroom reflect experiences that can be seen as outside of the teacher/student power dynamic. Writers who describe literacy acquisition as movement into a group or relationship they are already part of put themselves in empowered positions as communicators. They possess authority over the material, allowing them to include orality in their definition of literacy. Their orality is preserved in the literate realm.

Equally important is the way these assignments can assist students with the process of writing. Like literacy narratives, this genre opens routes for imitation to the student. Students can learn not only from the examples set by others, but also from the awareness of how their language use and very identity has been shaped by other people.

Example Assignment Description

A lessons-learned essay assignment is best suited for the beginning of the semester since students are most likely in need of confidence building when they feel new. The assignment also introduces concepts and skills that could be applied throughout the semester.

Prior to introducing the assignment, students would read excerpts from previous students' lessons-learned narratives that detail how specific influences have helped them

develop as communicators. Discussions of the readings would investigate definitions of “being literate.” Also, students would be encouraged to consider the author’s influences and how those influences might have shaped the author’s identity and social standing.

For the first phase of the assignment, students would be instructed to choose from one of the following prompts to write a paragraph on their communicative influences. This choice would allow them to consciously select an influence outside of the school realm.

1. I didn’t learn anything in school about communicating effectively compared to what _____ taught me.
2. One of the most important lessons I got from school about communicating effectively was from _____.

Some definition for “communicating effectively” is necessary. Students should be reminded that communicating is writing and speaking, content and style, delivering and listening. They should be encouraged to think broadly about what they value in being able to relate to others. They are then forced by the assignment to think of one aspect of effective communication on their terms and how that lesson was made to them. The options for filling in the blank can be anything that helped them learn something they value in communicating. To think specifically, students can be encouraged to think of experiences that changed their outlook on communicating or people who have made an impression on them. This person could be someone they know personally, such as a

family member, teacher, coach, neighbor, or friend; or, students could choose someone they know only as a public figure, such as a music performer, an actor, a preacher, a politician, or a writer.

This initial exercise should produce topic ideas for a longer essay. The full essay, two to three typed pages, could be done in either a narrative or examples format, explanations in the form of “details, particulars, and specific instance” (211), as John Langan puts it in his textbook. A narrative would probably best suit an experience; examples would be helpful to illustrate aspects of lessons learned from a person.

This assignment should put students into a critical frame of mind for discussing the meaning of being literate. They could be encouraged to think of themselves as experts on the type of literacy education they experienced. Also, since the assignment would situate them in the specific contexts of their own lives, they would also be well equipped to discuss the social influences that define different “types” of literacy. The skills detailed in the essay could be used in other assignments. For example, a subsequent assignment could be a written speech to an audience comprising the figures written about in the lessons-learned essay. Or, the next assignment could be a recommendation letter in the voice of someone they admire, or, perhaps an argumentative essay advocating for concerns shared by the literacy group written about.

Conclusion

Uncovering the personal influences that lay bare one’s personal literacies helps strengthen one’s sense of power as a communicator. Introducing into the composition classroom the people and events that make up the students’ skills is unmistakably

empowering, since no one else could explain the value of this history. And the presence of these influences could be especially advantageous for students since they represent alternative ways to learn that suit them. The teacher-student roles are reversed as these stories explain to the teacher how the students learn.

Since sensitivity to the teacher-student dynamic is especially important when it comes to personal writing genres, students must feel control over their representations of their worlds and themselves. Brodkey warns teachers that “the privileges of one subject—to tell stories or decide what the topic is—materially diminish the rights of other subjects” (657). As teachers, we are limited in how much we can model for our students. Students can be eased out of the pressure of seeing the teacher as the only model to follow by introducing their own communicative models to the material. For lessons-learned narratives, the world being shaped is the home culture that produced the writer. And the particular identity being cultivated is the writer who can define her communicative mastery through the particulars of her history. Introducing their personal literacy influences into the classroom through these essays allows students to exert their own identity into the classroom mix. As Smitherman puts it, “What students need (and here I would say both Black and white students) is not models of correctness—they have their own anyway—but a broader understanding of the intricate connection between one’s language and his cultural experience” (128). This approach moves the class toward an equal accounting of the difference of each student, while also respecting the amount of difference each student chooses to represent.

The ways we learn to communicate that are the most imbedded in our personal lives are also likely to be least conscious to us. We move cautiously writing a sentence

we feel might bring scrutiny for misusing a word. But words flow freely when communicating in the language we learned from our life experiences and know as correct. For composition instruction, the difference between these attitudes toward language use is critical. As Smitherman explains, “[Students] need to see how language is not something decreed from on High but an evolutionary dynamic, fluctuating according to the dictates of its users” (128). This confidence building approach aims to make conscious our comfort areas in language use. First we must know what we do possess and then see how it is relevant and adaptable to other rhetorical situations.

Chapter 7: Results of Lessons-learned Pedagogy

Literacy is a relative term. I feel highly literate talking with many of my neighbors who, like me, are college-educated professionals raising small children in the city on a modest income. Our exchanges mutually influence each other's lives. But I become silenced with a feeling of illiteracy when I visit a suburban tennis club and get among much wealthier doctors, lawyers, and investment bankers talking about their children's private schools. In class, I am very comfortable explaining concepts of rhetoric and composition to my students. But sometimes when I walk across campus the language I hear exchanged among groups of students seems impenetrable to me.

Literacy is also subject to degrees. I might feel barely literate enough to follow a conversation among engineers about how to install new organ pipes in our church. But I don't believe I could make a contribution that would influence their decisions. However, I might understand enough of the meaning exchanged among church leaders about a proposed ruling to our governance to make a comment, and feel the possibility that my input could influence their thinking.

Literacy is determined within the relationship one has with fellow language participants. It is variable, defined according to the group one is relating to. As Deborah Brandt explains in her definition of literacy in the *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition*, "meaningful standards or measures of literacy must be related to social context" (393). Understanding literacy as contextually bound can be empowering to any language user. Facing new literacy practices, one only needs exposure to the influences that shape that group's language use. Participation comes with adapting oneself to their particular expression. But participation is only a means to the real goal. Brandt points out

that a main concern for being literate is acquiring the kinds of communicative skills people need to join into the commerce around them and advocate for themselves (393). Participating in the social power shared by a group is what makes one's literacy practices successful.

But many students already know this. They usually know they have to change their use of language to fit into different groups. And the school standard is what they must learn to gain access to and status among other groups, namely the educators evaluating their careers as students.

The simplicity of this rhetorical view of literacy (communication determined by one's facility with the language of one's audience) is complicated by the different cultural values associated with different uses of language. Typically, students also know that certain language uses are thought to be smarter and have wider influence than other literacy practices. The dominant, imposing judgment of Standard English taints any other language use as inferior. Participating in the power of a group may not be just about speaking their language; it is also affected by one's relationship to the school standard. Using Standard English may be a warrant for assuming power and represent one's access to it.

Already participating in the general literacy approved for mainstream uses, I am able to see the subtle differences of language use as representing different groups of language users. It looks multiple to me. I believe I could immerse myself in the language of nearly any profession and come out talking the talk perhaps effectively enough to influence decision-making among its participants. But for those whose

language use falls outside of the accepted norm, literacy looks like an “us” and “them” negotiation. While “they” enjoy a multiplicity of options, “we” only have each other.

Though students may intuitively know the rhetorical variability of literacy, they are still subject to the recalcitrant barrier of school correctness that protects the privileged status of standard dialect speakers. It is difficult to retain the life lessons one has learned adapting to different rhetorical situations while facing the wall of judgment that makes students feel excluded when failing the tests of correctness. One solution is to confirm the student’s literacy skills by teaching the school standard within the accessible framework of rhetorical multiplicity.

The way I have chosen to help neutralize the intimidating force of learning the school standard is to highlight the student’s individual literacies while learning composition lessons. By writing about how surrounding influences have shaped students’ literacy practices, this pedagogy presents their personal literacies as a vehicle for entering college essay writing.

The following is a discussion of the use of this pedagogy and its effectiveness. Examining student papers, I show how students are able to draw from and add to their personal literacies as they adjust to academic rhetorical situations.

In the fall semesters of 2002 and 2003, I used the following pedagogy (described in more detail in Chapter 5) with my freshman English composition students. For their first assignment, students wrote essays according to the following instructions:

In this assignment you will tell a story or give examples from your life that detail your experiences with learning an important lesson about communicating, either spoken or written. Think of events or people who have influenced your knowledge of how to communicate effectively. You might think of events that changed your outlook on communicating or people who have made an impression on you, by the way they behave (style) or the words they use (content). Putting it into a question, you could ask yourself: who or what has shown me or told me what I think is important about making myself understood by others? Think across your entire life to generate ideas. For instance, for events, you could think of times when you have noticed yourself writing or speaking in a way that was new for you. For people, you could think of someone you know personally, such as a family member, teacher, coach, neighbor, friend, etc; or, you could choose someone you know only as a public figure, such as a music performer, an actor, a writer, a preacher, a politician, etc.

In total, I have 161 responses to this essay prompt. In my analysis of these essays, I find various ways that this assignment brings out the rhetorical skills cultivated personally by the students. In general, students mine their personal skills as they process the meaning of specific life lessons in relation to broader communication skills. Adapting personal knowledge to school lessons connects the literacies of home and school in a way that makes conscious effective persuasive techniques the student is very comfortable with.

Below is a broad categorization of the topics discussed in the papers. This breakdown accounts for all of the papers, though there is much difference among the

students' comments within each of the general topic areas. Also, each paper does not fit distinctly into one topic description. Some of the papers discuss up to three of these categories.

Breakdown of Topics Covered in Student Essays

Handling relationship problems

Being honest

Being understanding

Respecting oneself and others

Handling physical conflicts

Standing up for oneself

Listening to others

Expressing one's feelings

Respecting others and oneself

Handling hardships

Single parents raising family

Teen raising a child

Death of family member

Illness, disability in family

Trouble with Law Enforcement

Unemployment, poverty

Isolation and ridicule from peers

Handling racist attitudes

Job successes

Customer relations

Relationship with supervisor

Interviews

Involvement in sports

Musical performance successes

School successes

Inspirations from books, speeches, and song lyrics

Religious faith

Christian charity

Family history passed down

These topics cover what students have experienced themselves or what they observed in other people's lives. When writing about what they learned from others, students chose family members 80% of the time, mothers getting 60% of that share. Also noteworthy in this general overview of the topics is the smaller attention given to school and books for lessons on communication compared to home. Less than 20% of the essays draw upon what they learned from teachers and writers. Only five of the essays discuss lessons from texts (two of them choosing Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise"); the rest describe lessons in spoken communication.

In these essays, I find two aspects of the students' personal literacies present. One is linguistic. The language students learned from family members, pastors, rap artists, neighbors, and others in their community is heard throughout these papers. These voices

often emerge aphoristically and in narrative details. The other aspect is rhetorical, which will be the focus of this analysis. In many cases, these essays describe a personal theory of effective rhetorical practices. Like literacy narratives, they describe what worked for these individuals in their evolution as communicators. Describing their successes and the lessons they have learned, these essays present a sort of collection of self-survival rhetorical theories. Among the 161 versions of what works for each student, I find them relying on five general categories of rhetorical strategy.

One approach relies heavily on the emotional content, or pathos, of the message being conveyed. These students believe that communicating effectively comes from an emotional inspiration, that people choose language in accordance with how well the words maintain the power of the feeling. This use of inspirational words to initiate communication can be quite helpful in writing.

Another rhetorical approach discussed in these papers is the use of imitation to bring about a desired effect when communicating. Many students describe their awareness of modeling others who they believe are effective communicators.

A third strategy described relies on the use of maxims for rhetorical effectiveness. A number of students explain how they have learned from and use wise sayings. This aphoristic approach allows them to carry the lessons they have learned from elders into new rhetorical situations.

The most dominant idea presented in these papers is the importance of one's self-image for being an effective communicator. Attitudes toward oneself shape the clarity and persuasiveness of one's words. This effective persona, or ethos, is described with different qualities, but the particular descriptions overlap on the general issue of self-

assuredness. As a rhetorical strategy, this approach relies on a forthright presentation of oneself. In some cases, the importance of a confident character is described in relation to an audience, who would respond favorably to this ethos. But for other students, this quality is described only in relation to oneself, as a way to become clear and defined for oneself.

The last rhetorical approach I see described by these students is an appreciation for dialogism. Several students explain that a vital aspect to good communication is understanding the people one relates to.

Examining the students' responses, we can see how they have arrived at these notions of rhetorical effectiveness. In the students' language the papers describe knowledge and use of rhetorical concepts that could assist them in practicing college composition. The following analysis organizes their responses according to the categories listed above. The names of the students have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

Pathos

About ten essays discuss the value of using pathos, making an effective emotional impact on one's audience (see Appendix A for example essays¹⁴). Since feelings shape the way one thinks and acts, stimulating or settling emotions in one's audience can be a useful persuasive device. To use pathos effectively, Aristotle believed that rhetors must

¹⁴ The sample student essays in Appendices A-F were chosen to reflect the range of topics and abilities present in the entire collection. I selected stronger and weaker essays to reinforce my point that writing skill level is not a predictor for knowledge of rhetorical skills. The papers have been placed in these categories of rhetorical skills to reflect the dominant lesson described, but other rhetorical effects are also described.

understand the state of mind of people who are angry, fearful, confident, joyous, etc. Also, they must know who can excite these emotions in people; and, finally, rhetors must understand the reasons people become emotional (121).

These student essays show insight into some of these key features for using pathos. Without observing all of the dynamics Aristotle identifies, these students simplify his criteria for evoking pathos to mining the source of the rhetor's emotions. They all acknowledge that their own feelings can be a source for generating effective words for a situation. The papers display the range of experiences they learned this from. Tequila describes the inspiration she receives listening to her Pastor. William says that the words of a fellow rapper move him. For Michael, reading Harlem Renaissance poets is motivational. Observing her boyfriend, Brenda learns to channel her emotions into words.

Though these approaches sound relevant for invention strategies, they are presented as integral to making a strong point. The students are aware of the persuasive quality in these feelings that inspire them. As Nancy Wood explains in her book on argument, "Some proofs appeal explicitly to what all audiences are supposed to want" (207). These are motivational proofs, persuasive because they make the audience feel something they want. The emotional content these students aspire toward is associated with a common need or goal.

For example, Tequila assumes that her audience would want to possess a strong Christian morality. In her paper she describes how her minister's inspiration helped her handle stressful relationships working as a waitress:

When you have to take orders, serve food, and put up with people snotty moods, it will eventually take toll of you and you might think of nasty ways to talk. I again would turn to my minister to help manage my emotions. When we talked about my situation, he helped me see what I should really focus on. Now I feel like a Christian at work and sometime they smile back even.

Tequila uses the inspiration of her minister to provide her with an emotional content that helps her effectiveness as a communicator. In the success she describes at work, she assumes that her audience is also motivated to be good Christians as well. “Feeling like a Christian,” shapes her language and bends a few smiles.

In another paper, Michael writes and raps from the inspiration he feels from literature. But the emotional content that motivates him is also associated with a need he assumes in his audience:

Most of the poems I read were poems written by the poets of the *Harlem Renaissance*. The poems they wrote weren't just filled with words. They poems they wrote were filled with emotion and all types of feeling. They were real. You can't just read one of their poems and not feel the truth they are feeling. After experiencing this from the poets of the *Harlem Renaissance*, I had a different prospective of poems. My different view was, 'If you can't feel it, it's not a poem.' Going off my newfound theory, when I read a poem and it didn't feel real to me, I didn't like it. I was reading so much, everyday, I found myself wanting to write to tell the truth. I had found my passion.

Michael claims that real poetry is not filled with words but with feelings that express truth. Michael describes this motivation for writing in the context of poetry and

rapping, but his strategy could easily be applied to prose. Such an approach can be persuasive, given the assumption that one's audience desires similar truths. Writing that expresses the feelings associated with high ideals can be very persuasive. I brought into class excerpts from Martin Luther King Jr.'s speeches to demonstrate this point. In a subsequent assignment, Michael wrote a speech to his old high school inspiring them to come to college based on ideals of success he believed he shared with his audience.

A couple of students had an opposite reaction to the persuasiveness of emotionally charged appeals. According to one student, "I learned through arguments with my mother that you don't have to yell to get your point across." Instead of finding emotive language effective, these students describe calmness as the source of persuasion. Being calm allows one to think clearly. This sounds like an appeal to logic, but these students describe peacefulness as the source of the words. Sound thinking and wisdom come from a state of internal stability.

One student, Shaunta, described how she is inspired to remain calm when communicating by watching one of her friends. Her friend always remains calm and "always knows what to say"--"His calmness effects anyone that comes into contact with him." Shaunta believes that feeling peaceful inside prepares the way for appropriate words. Like the previous students described, Shaunta points out the advantage of communicating an emotional state others find desirable.

These students describe a limited use of pathetic appeals. They seem distant from Aristotle's analytical process of understanding the emotional state of one's audience and provoking or calming it for rhetorical advantage. But an initial step toward that process is suggested in the awareness of how an inspired state affects the outcome of the

message, especially when the emotion appeals to the audience. These students begin to outline the connection between the shaping of one's words and the emotional reaction of one's audience. I practice with my students how to give supporting details that could convey an effective emotion. I present an abstract idea that states an emotion, such as "MSU students who live on campus are treated unfairly given the conditions of the dorms." They then pick an emotion that would convey this point and write out a paragraph of concrete details that elicit that feeling.

Imitation

At least thirty students discussed the use of imitation in their development as communicators (see Appendix B for example essays). They acknowledge a conscious influence on their speaking and/or writing from such people as parents, rap artists, ministers, and friends. These students understand what Crowley and Hawhee teach in their book on the use of ancient rhetoric in the composition classroom: we become good communicators by following examples of people who speak and write well, not by cultivating our natural talents (290). But these students learned this lesson from their personal experiences. In their essays, they describe how they acquired various communicative skills by studying and practicing the language used by those they admire.

Many students bring up how they have adopted someone else's style. Tina, for example, describes following her mother's display of confidence when trying to be persuasive:

The most valuable lesson that I have learned from my mother is it's not what you say, but how you say it. In other words, when you communicate you should

appear to be credible. For example, when my mother speaks, she speaks with such confidence and wisdom, that if she told you the sky wasn't blue you would believe it. Her words are inspiring, and expressed with such strength and conviction, but at the same time with such proper etiquette and very lady like. I always use her proper ways when I say something in a way I really want people to believe me.

Tina indicates a complex makeup to the style she imitates in her mother. She borrows both her mother's respectful mannerisms and the strength in her voice, suggesting considerable sophistication in perceiving her mother's example.

Brandon also describes learning his "cocky is confidence" style from the rap music star Jay-Z. But Brandon introduces the notion of copying distinct parts of someone else's work to make it part of one's own. Brandon applies what rhetoricians would call commonplaces to basketball playing.

You can take from the greats but put your own style in it to distinguish yourself from them. [Jay-Z] did this by reciting a phrase or two that was not really know to the public; that was made by a rap artist great, and made it know with his style. He did all this while still paying respect to the great ones. I do this on the basketball court. I take certain moves and habits from the great players of the game and try to incorporate them into my own. If you learn and steal from the best you can only be the best.

Brandon applies traditional rhetorical principles to a venue I imagine most would consider outside of that tradition. But his perspective is very consistent with the rhetorical tradition throughout, as he notes at the end, "Many people believe that you

should be yourself and don't act like others, but I feel if you emulate someone successful you will only be allowing yourself to prosper."

Another student, Tarvarus, offers the insight that imitating one's influences is unavoidable and subconscious, triggering unintended results. Tarvarus describes following the examples of his friends, simply because he spends a lot of time with them, not that he is intentionally trying to emulate their skills:

Now my Boy Mike he's kinda short and stoky so I guess he fell like he gotta prove something. So he talk with his hands alot. Let's say if he's on the phone and he get's made he'll start talking with his hands and point you know swing at the air. Now me when I'll be talking to any one I will talk with my hands and when I'm on a phone when they get me mad It will be like I'll be jumping at them with my body but I'm just doing it like my Boy.

Tarvarus points out the inherent role of imitation in communication and miscommunication. Such awareness suggests that controlling the impact on one's audience is closely tied to whom one imitates in delivering the message.

Tiffany explains how imitating hip-hop artists has taught her to express herself through another persona. Like the ancient rhetorical practice of *ethopoeia*, she describes speaking in a fictitious voice for a certain rhetorical effect. In Tiffany's case, she sees the advantage as protecting the author from direct criticism and allowing audiences to identify with the author through the character imitated:

The mask of entertainment allows artists to say lyrically what they are afraid to say publicly or in person, in fear of damaging their character by saying things that people wouldn't ordinarily approve of. If the thoughts behind the song are

presented from a different point of view (other than their own), than the words that have been said can't be perceived as the true feelings of the artist but those of the person's point of view that has been presented. In another way, speaking from another point of view can be helpful in communicating with an audience by helping them to better identify with the situation by the person speaking.

Tiffany's observation offers a sophisticated application of *ethopoeia*. Persuasion is gained by reshaping the author's identity to reach out to the audience while at the same time deflecting personal criticism. In the examples she gives about the rap star A-Z, the ethical emphasis of the imitated character is made clear:

In A-Z's *Fanmail*, he speaks from two different people's points of view about the impact of his own music. The first verse is the voice of an inmate at the Fish Scale Correctional Facility in New York, who has written a letter to A-Z about how his music has influenced his life and the life of the rest of the "population of men" in the facility. This verse can help inmates everywhere to relate to the speaker's situation. The second verse is the voice of a young woman who had been a fan of A-Z for years and she talks about how her baby's father (now deceased) who "felt his style" and "said he was best." Her experience can identify with a lot of single mothers in the world who are hip-hop fans.

In all of these examples, various forms of imitation are understood and used by these students. The question is how to transfer these practices to the college composition classroom. One might question what rap stars or friends back home have to do with writing a coherent, unified, well-supported essay. The answer lies in the communicative models students choose. Whose language uses do students study and imitate? Quintilian

lays out, in four volumes, detailed instruction on how to raise the perfect citizen-orator. Central to his approach is the power of imitation. We learn how to speak by modeling ourselves on those around us, so these influences require careful attention. Much of Quintilian's curriculum focuses on deliberate imitation of great speakers. Given the rhetorical knowledge these students have learned on their own, they are well disposed toward picking up academic discourse by following its example in imitation exercises.

For instance, I bring in excerpts from the University's Mission Statement, Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech, and Richard Wright's *Black Boy*. After we analyze the three styles, they choose one to imitate to describe themselves, in the third person, as an able professional in one of their employment experiences. Sharing these responses can be amusing and edifying as students affect different voices to convey their personal experiences.

Maxims

Close to twenty papers discuss the value of using maxims (see Appendix C for example essays), summary statements that the rhetor uses to urge one on to something or steer one to avert it (Athonious 269). In the ancient Greek tradition, maxims were used as generalized assertions that present judgment or advice. According to Aristotle, the maxim's wording roughly outlines syllogistic logic, giving the conclusion or premise of an enthymeme (182). According to Aristotle, maxims can be persuasive not only in their logical construction but in their appeal to the audience's experience: "[P]eople are pleased if someone in a general observation hits upon opinions that they themselves have about a particular instance" (186). Also, Aristotle points out that one's ethical stature can

be enhanced when using maxims that draw upon moral principles held by one's audience (186). Maxims have also been appreciated for their ornamental value. After Aristotle, teachers such as Quintilian recommended maxims as a stylistic device in addition to their persuasive logic (VIII. 5). These familiar, catchy sayings "have acquired immortality," says Quintilian, because they carry the "conviction of their truth to all mankind" (V xi, 41).

Today, it is hard to find any mention of maxims in textbooks on writing instruction, though their rhetorical strength and popularity have long been acknowledged. And, I believe, writers familiar with their use could surely find them advantageous in academic situations. Geneva Smitherman points out that the use of proverbial statements is a common characteristic of the African American oral tradition. Smitherman claims that aphoristic language harks back to the African cultural-linguistic pattern that African slaves retained while adapting to the New World (218): "Many proverbs are quoted by mothers to their children and serve as child-rearing devices to teach rapidly and in no uncertain terms about life and living. 'A hard head make a soft behind,' 'If you make yo bed hard, you gon have to lie in it,' and 'God don't like ugly' are three such frequently used proverbs" (218). These sayings also fit into the definition of maxims in the rhetorical tradition, providing concise advice or judgment.

These students describe having learned, usually from elders, the wisdom and persuasive value of such sayings. Family members, coaches, public speakers, pastors, and song-writers represent nearly all of the students' sources for these sayings. The papers also discuss the use of maxims as both tools for logical argument and as a stylistic device.

Several students discuss elders who have had life experiences that relate to maxims they use. Their pithy sayings, therefore, embody a deep personal history, making their persuasiveness dependent upon understanding the life represented in the maxim. Several of the essays explain the rhetorical effectiveness of a saying by elaborating on its context. For instance, one young man wrote about the value of his older brother's message in the role of helping his younger siblings:

Tabron carried the weight of being the oldest of all us kids by showing us and helping us do our chores, or taking responsibility when something was damaged or dirty. As life began for me, Tabron pushed me around and made me a strong individual physically and mentally. He physically taught me how to hold my ground and not to let anyone put me down. So in result, I started to voice my opinion when I thought something was not right, and I began to have more confidence about myself even if I dropped a pass in football or missed a shot on the basketball court. He mentally taught me to "believe and achieve." For example, he showed me that if I pictured myself as the best on the team; the coaching staff would notice me. Tabron's words of wisdom could move anyone if you followed him thought your life. Obstacles are hurdles, which are not that high to get across. "Believe and achieve," said Tabron, and I can take those words and elevate over any obstacle that stands in my path.

Another student, Dawn, discusses the hardships her grandmother overcame through her lesson to "always turn the other cheek." Tai explains the meaning of "never advertising what's not for sale" through her aunt's experiences of being harassed by men. Jonathan learned from his mother's experience of maintaining a successful career while

raising a family as a single mother to “Be first and not last; above and not beneath; the head and not the tail.” Lauren learned from her older sister’s troubles with abusive male relationships to “Love who you are, no matter what you have done.” Angela discusses the drug addiction and recovery behind Mary J. Blige’s lyrics when she sings, “life can only be what you make it.”

Other students explain how they have learned from their elders to use maxims for persuasive effect according to the situation. Travis recalls his grandfather’s advice, “a closed mouth don’t get fed,” to encourage him to speak up. Wayne describes admiring the catchy phrases that Jesse Jackson uses to help his audience visualize his points, such as “Keep Hope Alive.” Elwood quotes his mother’s phrase, “Brothers by blood and love should act like it,” to stop a family fight. Andrea recalls the lyrics, “It shouldn’t take a whole day to see the sunshine” after September 11, 2001, convincing her to appreciate the loved ones around her. Austin heard from his basketball coach after losing a game, “sometimes when you lose you actually win.” These words came to change Austin’s attitude toward being patient. As he explains, “Those positive words simply meant, you could have lost the game or received a ‘C’ on a research paper, but as long as you tried your hardest you actually won or accomplished something from what you learned.”

These students, and others, display knowledge of the rhetorical force of maxims. To varying degrees, they demonstrate understanding of how to apply such sayings and when they are appropriate. Given the long influence of maxims in the Western rhetorical tradition, academic audiences are already accustomed to maxims, though in spare amounts. Zealous use of aphorisms is likely to produce clichés, I believe. But opportunities to practice essay-writing skills can be drawn from students’ knowledge of

maxims. Ancient students enhanced their rhetorical skills by doing such exercises as amplifying maxims. Contemporary students could find similar value in practicing elaboration from sayings they have their own understanding of. I often have my students take a saying like “keep it real” and explain it in a short paragraph. Then I ask them to use it only once in a paragraph to emphasize a point being made.

Ethos

The most common rhetorical skill discussed in these student essays is the effective use of one’s persona or ethos (see Appendix D for example essays). Ethos represents the ethical stance of the rhetor, the credibility one possesses when speaking or writing on a subject. Aristotle believed this quality to outweigh the other two appeals to an audience, the emotional (pathos), and the logical (logos). Aristotle emphasizes ethos above the other appeals because “we trust men of probity more...about things in general, while on points outside the realm of exact knowledge, where opinion is divided, we trust them absolutely” (8). He believed that the qualities a speaker must evince to gain the audience's confidence are intelligence, trustworthiness, and good will.

About seventy students wrote about the importance of one’s image to convey a message effectively. There is, of course, a range of self-images these students have learned, but nearly all of them fit under the general category of being self-assured. Broken down into sub-categories, one can see various ways these students have learned to develop a positive self-image when communicating.

For instance, one approach is to display authority in the subject, or pretend authority. One student, D’Marcus, describes this lesson from reading about and watching

videos of Malcolm X: “As I look at Malcolm X, I realized that he always knew what he was talking about. He knew it so well it came out easy, like he was the authority. I believe that knowing what you are talking about is the key to communication.” Other students agree that being in control of the topic is important, but some emphasize the appearance of authority. For example, Alex says that he learned from his father to always appear knowledgeable: “My father gives people directions to wherever they want to go whether he knows the way or not because he feels that he should know everything.” Sharice writes of her impression of her mother in a situation while giving a talk about a subject her mother knew nothing about:

My mom knows a lot about the history of Harriet Tubman, but she knows nothing about water ways or anything about Harriet Tubman using the water ways.

Everything that she studied about Tubman was on land routes not water, but she talked her full time slot even though she did not know truthfully what she was talking about. As my mom said she told what little bet she knew and “filibustered” her way through. The people who heard her speech were very impressed and never knew that she was ad-libbing the whole time. What really impressed me was how confident my mother was when she was talking the whole time.

A second approach many students describe is the importance of possessing an air of self-respect and dignity to communicate well. The papers account for various sources for this self-confidence. For example, Malika has learned from her mother that to believe in herself and the Lord, “Speak the impossible and the Lord will grant it.” Likewise,

Cheri learned from her mother, “You have all the strength you want as long as you have faith.”

Tiffany describes learning from her father, after his release from prison, the importance of keeping one’s dignity in order to be heard:

Since coming out of jail, my father has been so confident and positive in himself that he won’t fail at falling back into the drug scene. His attitude is focused on doing things that make him happy and his family proud.

Tiffany attributes his success at finding a good job to his dignified persona: “Most times when people stay confident, good things work out in their favor sometime.”

Terin, on the other hand, explains that success in sports is the source of his confidence:

When I gained confidence in my ability as an athlete, my overall self-esteem inevitably increased. The more football games and wrestling matches I participated in the more relaxed I was becoming around people. I improved my socializing skills and actually made more friends. I finally got up the courage to tell this girl I liked that I liked her! Even though she said “No,” with my new found self-esteem I could actually handle being rejected. This self-esteem didn’t just help me in school either. I built up the courage to finally talk to my dad as a person not a father. Now I feel that I can tell him anything and he’ll listen and give me his honest opinion.

Majida writes about the influence of her fifth grade English teacher:

Ms. Nia herself seemed to be a very confident person. I assumed that because she wore traditional African garments on a daily basis. Her jewelry was very odd to

me but beautiful she wore copper jewelry all the time, and she wore many different multi colored head wraps. She had sense of cultural pride and I admired that and the class really listened to her.

Majida further explains that from Ms. Nia's example she now wears traditional African clothes.

Jessica learns her self-confidence from her sister, who has helped her "be comfortable enough with who I am to express myself freely to anyone":

My sister carries herself as a proud black woman. She always walks with her head held high so that others may see her as a confident women. Also, she always keeps a smile on her face which make her more cordial to others. I have learned that walking with my head up high makes an impression to others that I am confident in myself and that I am not scared or frightened of the world ahead of me.

Some other students describe the importance of a respectful image before others. For example, Derrick explains that being respectful is the key to communicating to others:

I let people talk and listen to what they have to say, and in turn I get the same back. My high school track coach, loved to lecture people, almost in a scolding manner. Most of my teammates wouldn't pay any attention to him. They would talk over him or just look the other way. But I would actually try and listen to what he had to say, even if I didn't agree with it. He respected me, because I respected him. I was one of the few kids who he would listen to when I had something to say.

A third approach to presenting oneself as a self-assured communicator is to be assertive, even aggressive in one's attitude. For example, Travis describes learning from his grandfather to "let your presence be felt through your delivery": "My grandfather used to tell me to talk loud, so that I can be heard. My grandfather would always say, 'A closed mouth don't get fed,' in which he was talking about letting yourself be heard when you are talking, because if not no one would hear you."

Common in these papers is the advice to speak one's mind. Shannon describes this approach as a family trait that has been passed down. She recalls hearing from her grandmother, "Make sure you don't let anyone get over on you always speak up and tell people how you feel."

Another, fourth, way to develop a self-confident ethos, according to these essays, is to possess a skill for moving easily between different linguistic groups, code-switching. A number of students have picked up from others how to adjust oneself according to the social demands of the situation. This skill is described by most as a sign of confidence, an unflappable ethos, facile enough with language to fit into any social group. Though about seven students describe this use of ethos, Jamiellah characterizes this approach especially well in the lessons she got from her mother:

Being from the hood doesn't necessarily mean you have to act like it. A person has to know how to switch certain personalities on or off for certain situations. When you're hanging out with your friends you are free to act and speak in any way you want, but if you were in a job interview you can't act the same way. My mother always told me that people are judged on the way they act and speak, and they you have to have a balance for where you're from and where you're at.

Having a balance of personalities will give you the confidence to fit in wherever you want.

A fifth method describes building an effective, self-assured ethos through being open with one's audience, sharing thoughts freely. Sometimes this approach is described as being "true to oneself." It is one's absolute honesty that provides the solid self-image: For example, Danielle describes how she learned to communicate effectively by "being her own person:"

When I was younger I looked up at my Grandmother with admiration. Such a sweet lady but no one was able to take advantage of her. She held her own and people always showed her respect. I was smaller than a lot of kid, so some of them would think they could push me around. But taking in what I learned from my Grandma, I stood strong and didn't let any other kid run over me. She told me to act like me and no one would talk about me. She said my personality would shine through my color.

Donald describes the success of this approach when having difficulty fitting into school socially: "When I had observed my situation, finally, I realized that being yourself is more comfortable than being what people want you to be. I even felt better about meeting new people and interacting with teachers."

Herbert explains this lesson a bit differently. He learned from his father "the definition of a strong black man," which he describes as "being the best that he could be," a persevering ethos that is always consistent:

I remember back in 1995 when there were more people in our house than I have fingers. When a family member needed help or needed a someone to pick them

up they came to my father. He believed family came first and you should do anything for them. It wasn't always smiles, lemonade, and green lights for us. There were loud kids, bathroom problems, and arguments, but through it all my father showed he was the cornerstone to the family and always seemed to have a solution for everything.

Another way to achieve this confident ethos is through the identification one feels with those who are open and honest. People who speak or write about their hardships inspire others to assume the same honest ethos. Kelly describes such inspiration from a rap star:

Tupac Shakur speaks about truth and issues going on in society. Listening to him and some of the experiences he went through and talks about helps me communicate. He reassures me that I am not the only one who is going through these experiences.

In Tupac's open articulation of the struggles in his life, Kelly finds the confidence to be her "real self" when she communicates. Other students wrote similarly about the effect Tupac had on them. Trevor says that he is "a much better person today because of Tupac"--"He has inspired me to be truthful and honest with everyone." Likewise, Eminem is credited by other students for helping them be honest; as Sabrina puts it, "I challenge anyone to be as real as Eminem even myself."

All of these methods portray a positive self-image that the students find persuasive: displaying authority, possessing self-respect, being assertive, code-switching, and being honest to oneself. The qualities of an effective ethos for these students are somewhat different from Aristotle's view, which espoused intelligence, trustworthiness,

and good will. But the reliance on feeling self-assurance for a constructive ethos is close to the authoritative stance also recommended by rhetoricians.

In the last sub-category covered, those who rely on “being themselves,” students might face the most difficulty adjusting to the different expectations of an academic audience. Adjusting one’s image, bringing out from oneself the qualities an audience will respect is key to using ethos effectively, yet these students seem to believe in a single way to approach all audiences. These students can be made aware of the variable nature of ethos by other students who recognize the need to construct the self-assured ethos they find effective.

Since ethos concerns the character of the communicator, judgments about the persuasiveness of one’s character are for audiences to decide. Aristotle’s criteria for an effective ethos have long been a part of the rhetorical tradition in the West. But as one steps away from that tradition, different cultural standards emerge. For instance, Geneva Smitherman’s characterization of the African American sacred-secular oral tradition includes exaggerated language, mimicry, and braggadocio (216). Such appreciation for stylized performance would make a pronounced self-assurance key to a positive ethos. Since these students have been influenced by African American oral tradition, they possess awareness of the advantage of presenting a positive image before an audience that favors outward self-confidence. Giving my students exercises that practice establishing credibility on a topic, I find most of them quite able to assume an authoritative stance.

Dialogism

About twenty papers discuss the significance of listening to others (see Appendix E for example essays). This skill is described as key to responding sensitively and learning from others to inform one's response. Most of them describe patience as the central characteristic they have developed to become good communicators.

Rachel, for example, has learned from her mother to be “open and always ready to hear what other people think.” Rachel believes one needs to be “patient with everybody” to have successful relations. Kayzanne explains that she learned from her best friend the value of understanding another person: “We always take time to listen closely to what each of us is saying. It helps both of us to express our inner self better when we know that the other is right behind listening and helping the other with the problems.” Shirmonda says her grandmother's “gift of patience” helped her become more expressive: “My grandmother always took the time to understand me and made it easier for me to say what was on my mind.” One of the few male students who discusses the virtues of listening explains that his father taught him to help people by giving them advice after hearing out their problems.

These students may not realize that the skills they mention have a long history in communicative studies. Dialectic is a practice Plato recommended that allows people with different views to come to a common understanding by questioning each other on a topic. Plato believed that people could achieve understanding on an issue by yielding to the wisdom of other people's ideas. Plato consciously offered an approach that challenged the rhetorical model of an individual trying to persuade his audience. But that challenge continues today. Some composition scholars believe that writing pedagogy

should account for the dialogic nature of communication. According to Thomas Kent, one position generally held by post-process theorists is that reading and writing are interpretive acts. “When we read, we interpret specific texts or utterances; when we write, we interpret our readers, our situations, our and other people’s motivations, the appropriate genres to employ in specific circumstances, and so forth” (2). Reading and writing demand that one enter into a “relation of understanding with other language users” (2). These students have learned from their own experience a nascent theoretical thrust of rhetoric and composition studies: that writing should be taught as a mutual exchange among participants.

From a practical standpoint, these students identify a particular argumentative strategy. They might benefit from knowing the expectations of a dialogic approach, that there are ways to present ideas not to win an argument, but to contribute their understanding of the topic for others. They could be taught that their approach does not need to argue for consensus. They could present a view to influence a consensus. Writing with a dialogic dynamic in mind, these students may accommodate the views of others in their position, while encouraging others to join in the discourse.

Various Rhetorical Skills

The preceding categories do not account for each and every rhetorical skill discussed in my students’ essays. About ten essays present a variety of skills mentioned in single instances throughout the collection (see Appendix F for example essays).

For instance, Amol explains how he learned from his father to listen for the flaws in someone’s argument, “then using the flaw I saw how my father would stay on that one

topic.” This approach could be studied further through rebuttal and refutation. Another student, Alicia, believes that the most “natural” and “valuable” method to communicate is through narrative, instead of exposition. Recapturing experience through the events is more riveting than merely explaining it, the student argues. Students like Alicia might benefit from learning of the expository quality of narrative. They might be ready to pick up the skills that allow an author to select and emphasize details that support certain interpretations. Phillip uses the “ignorance of others” to shape his rhetorical approach. Giving examples of stereotypical treatment of him as a black man, Philip chose his words to “make them see their ignorance.” In one instance, when a store clerk continuously watched him with a “he doesn’t trust me look,” he consciously reacted calmly and went up to the employee and asked for his help courteously. Philip also seems ready for learning skills of refutation and rebuttal.

This analysis is not meant to exhaust all topics covered in these 161 student essays. I have tried to distill the skills described into recognized rhetorical practices. This culling process eliminated discussions of such topics as trying to use correct grammar, hearing words of encouragement, having charismatic teachers, and possessing high ambitions.

But nearly all of these papers describe skills that are relevant for the composition classroom. Instructors ought to seize these moments to show students how the skills they illustrate from their experiences are related to what composition teachers try to teach. Students may be more ready for academic writing than they are aware—and more than their instructors are aware.

Conclusion

Students who arrive at college stepping cautiously where they might find “academic discourse” are not uncommon, nor do they lack justification. Academic language represents the ultimate standard for school correctness, what all their previous teachers were trying to prepare them for. Educators who impose a separation between “academic discourse” and “personal writing” unnecessarily alienate these new voices, as Deborah Mutnick points out, “imped[ing] writers’ development by imposing artificial limits on attempts to make sense out of complex experience” (80). Instead, Mutnick suggests, personal narrative is key to self-empowerment, listing several writers who “utilize the first person to reconfigure oppressive notions of gender, racial, ethnic, and class identity imposed on them by the dominant culture” (81). As long as students are given the opportunity to emerge, “the composition classroom can offer ways for students and teachers to test out and rethink cultural theories from perspectives outside the critical academy” (Seitz 77). The result might lead to productive questioning of dominant, middle-class ideologies (77).

But how realistic is it that composition pedagogy will affect sources of cultural authority, especially when presented within the monolith of academia? As David Seitz points out, “we also know that writing and discussion in these contexts [composition classrooms] are constrained within the institutional context, students’ school histories, and different community values toward education” (77). Focusing instead on the students, one might recognize how they are already accommodating to the school standard by coming to class. They know the advantages of communicating the school way and don’t want to be left out.

Personal narrative brings students' lives into the classroom. Literacy narratives bring in their personal struggles and successes with reading and writing in school. Lessons-learned narratives bring the students' personal literacies into their essays. Robert Yagelski, in his book *Literacy Matters*, recommends that literacy pedagogy should connect "the ways in which writing and reading function in our students' lives as people and citizens outside our classrooms" (164). Like Yagelski, I conceive of literacy as a local act that navigates and integrates surrounding communicative forces. This pedagogy offers students a practical way to make those influences manageable, bringing students closer to school discourses. Students feel access to the college way of communicating when they realize they already share some of its constituent elements.

Bringing to light a student's communicative skills is initially a confidence-building move. Uncovering one's personal communicative influences, one's personal literacies, helps strengthen one's sense of power as a communicator. It is always a comfort to play to one's strengths. Uncovering the story of how one's language emerges through surrounding forces lays bare individual skills within the multiple nature of literacy. The information brought out in the pedagogy I describe in this study prepares students for building on the skills they already possess. The student's expertise is defined in her own terms. And students' personal standards for literacy emerge on the page right along with the school standards. Once recognized by the student and acknowledged by the teacher, the student's personal standards become a source of strength and relevant as they are adapted to other academic rhetorical situations.

Appendix A (Sample student essays on pathos)

1. Communication is more than sounds coming from our mouth. More than an expression on our faces. It is more than a certain position our body is in.

Communication is making whoever your communicating with respond rather it's emotionally, physically, or mentally. I, myself, didn't always think this way until I started reading poetry.

Before poetry, I didn't always think of communication this way, in fact, I didn't think of communication at all. I took all types of words for granted, until one day in middle school. All the students in my class were assigned to read a poem and share our views of the poem we selected. After that assignment, I was on a complete different level of communication. I started reading poem, after poem, after poem.

Most of the poems I read were poems written by the poets of the *Harlem Renaissance*. The poems they wrote weren't just filled with words. They poems they wrote were filled with emotion and all types of feeling. They were real. You can't just read one of their poems and not feel the truth they are feeling. After experiencing this from the poets of the *Harlem Renaissance*, I had a different prospective of poems. My different view was, 'If you can't feel it, it's not a poem.' Going off my newfound theory, when I read a poem and it didn't feel real to me, I didn't like it. I was reading so much, everyday, I found myself wanting to write to tell the truth. I had found my passion.

I decided to pursue my dream started written poems. I didn't just start writing poems, I was writing rhymes. I was rapping! Rapping relieved me in a way I never felt before. I loved the fact I could rap and get my point across exactly the way I wanted.

There are no rules, no certain way to write, or confusing punctuation marks. Rap is exactly what you make it, your opinion, and only your view matters.

Poetry really changed my way of looking at literature also. I don't know what it was but I was reading more, too. I was reading things like *Odysseus*, *Maspath*, and *Hamlet*, on my spare time. I'm not saying if you read poetry you'll start reading those sorts of things, but that's what happened to me. What I'm trying to say is poetry opened me up to a whole New World.

In conclusion, poetry is more than just another form of writing. Poetry is filled with emotions and feelings. Poetry is an excellent way to communicate and get your point across the way you want. So if your looking for way to do just that, write a poem you'll see, but remember, "If you can't feel it, its not a poem."

2. Friends are an asset to life. They create a strong support system for life's tribulations. In life's good times they share in your success. The support system provides stability to one's life. My best friend, Adano has the ability to remain calm during exciting situations. He's helped me realize how important it is to be this way.

Adano does not let people's simple-minded actions make him upset. When he was driving to the movies, a yellow taxi cut closely in front of his car. He immediately slammed on the brakes to avoid hitting the taxi. I was in the passenger seat screaming and using hand signals toward the cab driver. Adano began sing a song on the radio and continued to drive. I'm still yelling at the driver so, he looked at me and said, "calm down". He never got angry with the driver for his simple-minded maneuver.

Adano helps his hysterical friends become relaxed. Whenever a bad situation occurs Adano is the first person his friends call. For instance, his friend Erica found out that her boyfriend was dating another young woman. Erica called Adano, she was crying and trying to tell him what happened. Adano complimented Erica's strong traits and made jokes about her weaker traits. She eventually calmed down. Adano always knows what to say to make you feel untroubled. Like, when my grandmother was in the hospital, I called Adano from the hospital. I was frantic and he constantly reassured me everything would be okay. He told me that my grandmother was a strong woman and could survive anything. He also, said that God was not ready for her yet. These words of wisdom made me feel at ease during a time of chaos.

Adano's calmness effects anyone that comes into contact with him. Whenever he enters a tension filled room, he immediately finds the source of the problem and gets that person to relax. He always has an anecdote or a few words to say in order to maintain peace. For example, he was at a friend's birthday party and his friend was upset because her mother was going to end the party if the guests started fighting. So, Adano stood up on one of the picnic tables and said, "we're all here to celebrate Sharon's birthday so, stop being petty and have fun!" the party was peaceful and everyone had fun.

Adano's calmness makes him unique. All of his friends benefit from his ability to remain calm. He give me a new relaxed perspective on life's wild situations.

Appendix B (Sample student essays on imitation)

1. By listening to influential rappers and lyricist, I have incorporated many ideas and attitudes. Such ideas were very pervasive in building my character into a strong, confident, intellectual individual. Many ideas and thinking patterns come from quotes from rappers such as Jay-Z. “Everybody gotta story....we all ghetto B.” “I prepare poems with a passion at the same time cash-in”. “If you don’t stand for nothing you’ll fall for everything”. These are just a couple of quotes that I had retrieve from the rapper Jay-Z a.k.a. Shawn Carter. These quotes and thinking patterns are just a few ideas I base my style of character around. Many people believe that you should be yourself and don’t act like others, but I feel if you emulate someone successful you will only be allowing yourself to prosper.

Jay-Z being a very large figurehead of the rap industry, has had a very large impact on my personality. He goes by the tenet “cocky is Confidence.” He demonstrates this in his rhyme scheme and in life. To him it’s all just life. He lives lavishly and he flaunts it well. And he does this in a confident manner. Also in his music he takes it very seriously and knows that this outcome is brilliant, so he acts accordingly. I take this example and apply it to my game on the court. When I get on the court I take my confidence to a whole new level. I feel that no one on the court can hold me. I feel as though that if you are guarding me that you basically have no chance in succeeding in the task. Jay-Z also carries himself in this way. He walks and talks with a swagger; and I somewhat do the same on the court. I believe that being confident is not being conceded, rather

that you just have more confidence in yourself than the next man can stomach. This is just one example that I portray on the court that was derived from Jay-Z's style. He has also taught me not to be ashamed of my accomplishments. I mean when he makes a big move in the music industry such as a new signing of talent, releasing a platinum bound album, or owning a new business he lets you know about it. I feel that there is nothing wrong with that, because if you put your heart and soul into something that you love you should be proud of what accomplishments stem from that.

You can take from the greats but put your own style in it to distinguish yourself from them. [Jay-Z] did this by reciting a phrase or two that was not really know to the public; that was made by a rap artist great, and made it know with his style. He did all this while still paying respect to the great ones. I do this on the basketball court. I take certain moves and habits from the great players of the game and try to incorporate them into my own. If you learn and steal from the best you can only be the best. Through Shawn's steady progression as an artist he has also inspired me to become a better student but still allowing myself to have the same environment around me. He steadily became a better artist while still in his environment where he grew up in Brooklyn. This inspires me to become a better student within my own environment. I see that anything can be done if you put yourself into it, and that is what he shows me.

Last but not least I think I have gain the knowledge of passing along my pain on to paper. When Jay-Z has something to say that hurts him he puts it on paper. For him that may turn into a new platinum selling album. For me it is just

a way to relieve my stress and problem. I put it on paper and it's as if it left my body. I usually just write poems that express how I feel at the moment in time, or just a letter to myself to read when I'm not in that same bad mode. I do this to reflect and to somewhat communicate with myself to keep an internal balance. What I also do that may have derived from Shawn is that I should try to work my frustration out in my school work. He throws himself into his music and a very good product is the return. I figure I should do the same and I can only prosper.

Different quotes, sayings, ideas, and styles of the Jay-Z factor have definitely shaped and styled my character. From emulating the greats and prospering to being confident on the court I have learned to become more successful by emulating successful people.

2. You know what I was thanking the other day about the way that I talk and why that I talk that way. I believe the people who influenced me to talk the way that I do would have to be the people that I talk to and associate with. I say this because if you're around someone long enough you will pick up on some of that person's traits and since I only be around my friends and family I pick up on some of their traits.

Some of my friends are Frankie, Mike, TJ, and my father, if you pay attention you will be able to see how so which who you're around with because you will become more like that person.

Now don't get me wrong Frankie is a pretty good person at heart once you get to know him but when he talks he talks with an attitude and curses a lot. Now me

a lot of people think when I talk I have a attitude but I don't that just the way that I talk like Frankie.

Now my Boy Mike he's kinda short and stoky so I guess he fell like he gotta prove something. So he talk with his hands alot. Let's say if he's on the phone and he get's made he'll start talking with his hands and point you know swing at the air. Now me when I'll be talking to any one I will talk with my hands and when I'm on a phone when they get me mad It will be like I'll be jumping at them with my body but I'm just doing it like my Boy.

Now TJ I know him from about 15 years I belive I picked up on a lot of slang from him. Forestence the other day I was in class and was saying Yea Man in Shit. Then I cough my self and was like Damn you know.

Now I got my attitude you know my pride from my father. You see my father is like this if you were to do something wrong to him he will forgive but wont forget. He also told me to never buge for nothing and always keep your head up.

Now if you take all of these traits you have the way that I talk so now you see why I say which who you around because you will pick up on their traits.

Appendix C (Sample student essays on maxims)

1. High levels of achievement can be difficult to reach, but with a little help and some encouragement, these levels can be achieved. For example, positive peer pressure can be highly effective when you are trying to complete anything. Being encouraged by many people can motivate the body to out do any task in life. In order to accomplish these goals, mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, and many others contribute great encouragement and motivation so that these duties or levels of success can be fulfilled. Learning to reach these levels are difficult, but the guidance of a perfect human being can help execute these tasks successfully. My brother is considered to me a perfect human being who helps me strive to be the best that I can be. I have learned to reach high levels through my brother's examples; now I can provide examples that will challenge my nephew to achieve.

My brother has pushed me to be the best, so I can succeed in life. My brother, Tabron Shorts, has given me confidence and skill so that life will not be so complicated. Tabron said, "life is complicated if you make it complicated. Work hard and you're your priorities straight to keep tasks simple."

Tabron carried the weight of being the oldest of all us kids by showing us and helping us do our chores, or taking responsibility when something was damaged or dirty. As life began for me, Tabron pushed me around and made me a strong individual physically and mentally. He physically taught me how to hold my ground and not to let anyone put me down. So in result, I started to voice my opinion when I thought something was not right, and I began to have more confidence about myself even if I dropped a pass in football or missed a shot on the basketball court. He mentally taught

me to “believe and achieve.” For example, he showed me that if I pictured myself as the best on the team; the coaching staff would notice me. Tabron’s words of wisdom could move anyone if you followed him thought your life. Obstacles are hurdles, which are not that high to get across. “Believe and achieve,” said Tabron, and I can take those words and elevate over any obstacle that stands in my path.

My brother has set great examples for me, and now I have challenges to compete with. First, he made honor roll, graduating with a 3.1 GPA. Now he is in the United States Marine Corp. Even though he didn’t go straight to college, his life has been a success. He is now the youngest Staff Sergeant in the Marines, supports his wife and two children, and on top of that has time to take college classes. When he says “Believe and achieve,” I know he means it because he backs it up.

My nephew, Jose, will be challenged and motivated by my examples. If my life is successful, this will pave the way and encourage him down the right path. I can encourage him and teach him not to become another brother who sells drugs on the corner. Attending college and trying to pursue my life in the career of my choice gives him a positive example to follow. Basically, I am a father figure for Jose because he is growing up without a father, so the things I say and do will be a positive example for Jose to pursue his goals.

In closing, I have learned that my brother’s achievements and encouraging words have inspired me hoping that one day my achievements will pass on to my nephew. I have learned that by having a positive example to follow I am prepared for any challenged or obstacles that lie ahead.

2. Everybody has somebody at a point in their lives, like a teacher, a grandparent, a mother, father or a person that has a great influence on them that have values. When someone has values they pass them on with things like “If there is a God, there is always a way,” and “Treat people the way you want to be treated.” These sayings that you can take to the heart because people can find times in their life time when they say something to themselves that may lighten, bright, guide, or encourage them to carry when times get rough, or going through trials and tribulations. These sayings have helped me put my mind at ease and carry a long way in my life.

In 1990 my grandparents told me it to “take your time and think about what needs to be accomplished.” Take your time they mean and find out everything that needs to be done day by day. Never think ahead because it could create a loss of memory of what you need to be done which could be very important. Physically or mentally do what needs to be done, rest if it takes to long. Read, run, take a walk, talk on the phone, etc. Whatever it takes to rest from what is stressful and is bothering you.

One day around the Christmas holiday I bugged my mother to death about getting a outfit to wear for Christmas and my mother to be patient and not to stress myself out over whatever it is that I was waiting for or wanting because “be patient and things will come in time.” She said it with a smile on her face. People always say that after wanting for a long time for something important or something that you’ve been expecting. In a result for waiting you come to found out that time is all that person has, and you must take advantage of the time because “time waits for no one.”

She also told me that “good things happen with good thoughts.” When you think positive good news comes and brightens your day and when you think smart you will get

good or successful in your achievements. So these are lessons I learned that are important in communicating.

Appendix D (Sample student essays on ethos)

1. Over the years we learn many lessons. Some lessons are more important than others. My oldest sister, Kimberly, taught me how to put my communication skills to use. My sister is a great communicator. This is by the manner in which she carries herself, her spoken words and her attitude. From her, I have learned to walk with my head held high and to be more confident in myself. Also, I have learned that by my spoken words and personality, I can communicate with anyone and I could possibly have an impact on them. Through my sister's traits, she has influenced me to be comfortable enough with who I am to express myself freely to anyone.

My sister carries herself as a proud black woman. She always walks with her head held high so that others may see her as a confident woman. Also, she always keeps a smile on her face which make her more cordial to others. I have learned that carrying myself the same way makes an impression to others that I am confident in myself and that I am not scared or frightened of the world ahead of me. Through Kimberly, I have also learned that keeping a smile on your face make you friendly to everyone. I find that in being pleasant and humble, I can be easily talked to. Either walking on the street, in a store, or even on campus. And when I do begin to communicate with others, I have no problem expressing myself because I know that I have already touched that person with my cordial smile.

Being a minister in church, my sister can easily stand before a crowd and give them a message from God. By preaching, she communicates with others on a more personal and spiritual level. From her, I find that I can do the same. When even I have a friend that is depressed or discouraged, I can easily approach them and try to comfort

them. I talk to them about their problems, try to help them find a solution, and try to connect their own problem to a situation of mine that may be similar to theirs. Like my sister, I have a soft spot in my heart for others in need and I try to help them in any way I can.

Having a good attitude about her, my sister can communicate easily. She is very spontaneous and likes to have fun. At the drop of a dime, she will crack a joke or say “let’s go out.” From Kimberly’s spontaneous attitude, I have learned that people find you easy to communicate with and find you as a friendly person. I find that I am very spontaneous and outgoing. On many occasions, I have gone to the nail shop or out to the mall and just started talking to people and they would respond back. I think the reason they responded back was because of my attitude I had towards them. Also, having a nice attitude, people may see you as a confidant and a counselor. I have many friends that will talk to me about their personal problems and seek advice from me. Being that they trust me, I can be open with that person and give them good advice or encouragement that they may need.

I have learned many beneficial lessons in communication from my oldest sister Kimberly. From her overall, I have learned to be comfortable with myself to express myself freely with anyone. I have learned these lessons through the way my sister carries herself, her spoken words, and through her attitude. Hopefully through what I have learned, I can be an impact on someone else.

2. “Speak your mind” are the tree words I often hear from my mother. She always tells me if I want people to know how I feel I have to speak my mind. No matter if I am

happy, sad, mad, right, or wrong, I should always speak up. My mother's advice has taught me the importance of expressing myself honestly in all situations, which has helped me to become an effective communicator. I am very happy to have a mother that gives me good advice that can stay with me for the rest of my life.

My mother is the type to let you know what she wants, how she want, what she want, and when she wants it. She's not the type to hold her tounge. My mother has always been like that for as long as I can remember. I am starting to belive that speaking your mind is a family trait. Even my grandmother tells me every now and then "make sure you don't let anyone get over on you always speak up and tell people how you feel. My grandmother passed the trait to my mother and now she has passed on the trait of speaking up to my brother, my sister, and I. She has always tells me "If you say what you have to say then no one can walk all over you." I learned this lesson at a young age and I will be sure to pass it on to my kids.

Speaking up has gotten me though a lot in life. I have been moved up from the JV cheerleading squad to the varsity squad, I have gotten pay raises at my old job, I have gotten grade changes in my 11th grade English class, I have made friendships and my relationships better, and I have helped others who feel that it is hard to speak for themselves. I do belive that I will continue to help my self and others by speaking my mind. In life you want something you have to speak up and go get it.

Appendix E (Sample student essays on dialogism)

1. Tera and Tonia, two good friends, were sitting outside on the porch one afternoon. When a few minutes later Tonia burst out crying in tears about problems she was going through with her parents. She said there was constant fighting between her parents. The fight between them would be for hours until 12 or 1 in the morning. Her parents were even having problems agreeing on what is right for her and the rest of the family. Tera was paying much attention to Tonia and what she was saying. She told Tonia that everything was going to be okay and that if she wanted to she was always welcome to stay as long as she liked over at her house. Tera reminds me of my best friend, Nicole, who is easy for me to relate to because of the types of responses she gives me when having a conversation, because we relate to each other and we share similar experiences.

When I am expressing myself to Nicole, not only does she pay attention to what I am saying, but she also takes the time to show me the many steps and ways into solving problems. Nicole gives me her true feelings and opinion about the situation and how she would go about finding the solution to her problem. Whenever the conversation is over Nicole gives me the impressions that she has accomplished a goal, impressed, satisfied, and leaves me feeling relieved to know that I have sat down and talked over my problems with someone. When a person is having problems the best thing for that person to do is talk out their situation with someone that is very understanding.

The understanding relationship that Nicole and I share is that we both are able to say what's on each of our minds without hurting the other one's feelings. We always take time to listen closely to what each of us is saying, because both of us understand the problem that is going on. It also helps both of us to express our inner self better when we

know that the other one is right behind listening and helping the other with the problems. When having a friend, the most important thing for both of you to have is an understanding relationship.

Nicole and I both have similar experiences with the parenting in our homes. Parents, sisters, and peers are the different problems that we both deal with. In some of the situations we realized that we were wrong and some we were right. But when it came to apologizing for our wrongdoings and mistakes that was the hard part but the most important.

Nicole helps me to express myself very easily, because we know each other very well. We have an understanding friendship, so when it comes to talking, and writing it is easy for me to relate to her. Communication is the key to our friendship. I choose her as someone that I look up to as a friend, and to share my feelings with.

2. My mother has indirectly influenced my communication skills by constantly arguing. I have learned through arguments and misunderstanding with my mother that you don't have to yell to get your point across.

Since I was younger my mother and I have gotten into several arguments. It's not just me argues with, but I have witness her argue with others as well. My mothers arguing never seems to help the situation, but instead it only make things worst. I think she argues because she doesn't know hot to express her feelings. From my opinion I think her method to solving problems are ineffective because people get loud and upset when they argue and neither party is completely heard, and that is where misunderstandings come in.

I have noticed over the years that my mother does have her own opinion, and when people don't agree with her she begins to argue instead of listening to the other person and talking things out. I think my mother's problem is that she thinks she is always right, and for her to think like that makes her narrow-minded for the simple fact that no one is right all the time. I used to argue back , but then I realized that is was pointless. When my mother argues her main goal is to get the other person(s) to weaken so they will see things her way. That simply goes back to the point where I said she always wants to be right.

I have learned though arguments and misunderstanding with my mother that minor disagreements don't have to end up I major conflicts. I have also learned that most arguments and misunderstandings can be reduced by people not yelling, people hearing each other out, and being open-minded; meaning that, people are not always going to agree with your thoughts, that is why they are called opinions.

Appendix F (Sample student essays on various skills)

1. A valued lesson I learned from someone was when I was a child; I was explained that because of my race I would be challenged in today's society. My parents sought out to teach my siblings and I how to relate in today's world.

Four years ago was when I obtained my first job. I was hired at a sears store in the main mall of Buffalo NY. There I was given the job as a non-commission sales rep., which meant that I sold clothes in the men's department. I was so excited about working and earning my own money. I remember the talk that my parents gave me before my first day. They explained that because of my race I would be challenged in today's world. That because I was a young black man that some people wouldn't give me the respect that I deserved and showed them. They also told me to look beyond ignorance and if I prayed and do my best that everything would be all right.

One day, while working hard at sears a customer came in to buy a shirt. I asked him if he needed any help, and he snickered and said no. When I returned to my station I noticed him asking a fellow employee for help. When he finally did arrive at the cash resister I had to ring him up and he began to yell that I was going to slowly. The only thing that saved me from yelling back at him and losing my job was remembering what my parents told me. And I apologized to the customer and continued on with my transaction.

In my junior year of high school, was when another racial experience transpired. In high school I was somewhat popular. I had many friends of many different races and sexes. One of these friends, whom I called a best friend, was slightly ignorant to racial differences. After class, he made a comment suggesting that all black men did this

certain activity. My first feeling was anger towards him but after remembering what my parents said I decided to explain to him how what he said could affect people. And after understanding the depth of his words he apologized and we still talk to this day.

With my parents explaining that everyone would not like me and that everyone would give me the time of day and that I need to look past that. I was able to move past these experiences by relating on a different level.

2. A person I have learned a lot from about communication is my father. When my father speaks he is so persuasive and so charismatic that you are indulged into his train of thought. My father tries to think like the person that he is having an argument with. I believe that is the reason why I have never seen him loose an argument. His tolerance helps him keep all situations under control. I think that this is the most important attribute in good communication.

My father is a persuasive person who about five years ago during a family vacation convinced our neighbors into borrowing their car. Well I don't know who other people are but if someone asked me if they could borrow my car for the weekend I would think they were crazy. But my father did it, he got the van for the weekend and we let the neighbors use our car.

Charisma is something that comes natural to my dad. When he speaks people listen. He just has that tone in his voice that is so demanding to be heard that a person have no choice but to listen and consider what he is saying to be the right thing. This quality was seen in Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Ghandi, and other world leaders. It is a very powerful tool in good communication.

When my father gets into an argument he tries to understand the person and what they are trying to say in the argument. Listening for flaws in a person's conversation my father hears what the meaning behind the argument is. Then, using the flaw he had found my father tries to stay on that one topic.

My father is a really good communicator. People are sometimes amazed at how good his English is for a person that came from India only 6 years ago. The society he was associated with, when he first came to American I believe made him a good speaker. He shows me many ways to get a point across to other people.

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