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My Personal Battle with Finding a Model to Fit the Reflective Autobiography

Amy Solinski

As I stood there, I felt naked, cold and shivering, exposed to the elements. I felt as if a harsh wind was blowing across my skin, goosebumps rising upon my flesh. I had been stripped of my academic clothing and protection; without my traditional discourse to protect me, my spirit and intellect were vulnerable. After years of training in "scholarly" writing, I had been asked to write about myself without an armor of theory and formal English. For the first time in five years of training in writing, I was asked to throw away imposed formats, to embrace emotion, and use reflection as my thesis and persuasive purpose. Thus, my first experience with writing the personal essay was terrifying. I needed a model to direct me—I needed someone else's writing to show me how to deal with emotion and ethos in my own writing.

When my students first face personal writing, they often feel this same type of fear, because they are so bound by traditional formats that they feel as if they will never produce the type of emotional reflection needed in writing a personal essay. Teachers need to make this situation more comfortable for their students. One way to help students through this novel situation is to provide effective models of personal essays with emotional reflection, therefore putting the students at ease. In a 1994 study, Elizabeth Stolarek found that modeling was beneficial in the composition classroom. The purpose of Stolarek's research was to study the effects of modeling on composition students, en-

abling her to decide which types of study conditions worked best with the modeling process. Her study involved 143 college freshmen who had completed introductory composition courses. She separated the students into five different study conditions: *Description Only*, *Model Only*, *Description Model*, *Model/Explication*, and *All Items*. The students received instructions for writing in a particular style of prose according to their assigned study conditions. The students were then asked to write in their prose style, on which they were then graded by how closely they followed the prose style (Stolarek 157). The results of this research were figured through the grades (in numbers) of the students' prose writing. *The Model/Description and Model/Explication* groups produced greatly raised scores. The highest scores were produced by the *All Items* groups (Stolarek 159). Stolarek found that modeling did indeed improve student writing. The modeling method was effective in the composition setting. Also, Stolarek concluded that description and explication were important to the modeling process (159).

However, teachers must carefully decide which models to use when helping students to write a certain type of essay. Unless the model is similar to the specific assignment guidelines, the students could be set up for writing failure, something every teacher wants to avoid. Last semester in my freshman composition class, I tried to choose an effective model for the reflective autobiography, a per-

sonal essay that is often difficult for the students to produce. In my classroom, this type of essay involves a combination of the narration of a specific personal event and reflection upon the significance and impact of this event. I encountered many difficulties in choosing the proper model, and I was forced to critically evaluate each model that I discovered.

A Model That Didn't Work

"My essay is great, Mrs. Solinski. It's just like the student essay we read in class. I even made the introduction exciting just like you said to do," said one of my freshman composition students during our first conference in my office. I was a first-year graduate assistant, and the reflective autobiography was the first essay I had ever taught in a college-level writing course. Since I wanted to emphasize personal subject matter, rather than design, in choosing a model, I had assigned a model student essay from our textbook, and hearing that a student had applied the model to the essay was enlightening for me. However, as I began to scan the student's essay, my enlightenment quickly melted into dismay. The student's paper, even with a clever introduction, was as far from my assignment guidelines as I could possibly have imagined. The paper rambled on and on with no reflection, and it discussed several summarized years of encounters with a mentor; however, my assignment called for the narration and reflection upon one specific event from the students' pasts.

After the student left my office, I began to sort through the rest of the papers, and to my dismay, they all rambled incessantly about many years spent with an enlightening mentor. Therefore, I had to re-evaluate my model, "Rick," a student essay about several years of experiences with a coach. "Oh no," I moaned, "this model essay has brought on horribly diffuse and off-task writing from my students." I had chosen the completely wrong essay as a model for my assignment guidelines and class discussions—the model didn't work. Once again, I was exposed to the elements. My model didn't fit my classroom—I had to throw it out and look for something that fit us better.

The text, "Rick," by student writer Brad Benioff, is not a piece of poor writing; it was chosen as an example of effective narration and reflection in a textbook chapter about writing this type of essay. Axelrod and Cooper, authors of *Reading Critically, Writing Well*, describe "Rick" as a piece of personal writing that "uses dialogue to dramatize" (47). So, the essay does model positive narration techniques for writing the reflective autobiography; however, the overall content of the essay discusses a series of experiences with a mentor, when my assignment called for *one* specific incident. The only reason that I had wanted the students to follow these guidelines was to keep them from writing rambling summaries of their high school careers. While attempting to help my students, I had actually hindered their writing by using a model that contradicted the guidelines I had given them.

In her research, Stolarek found that "students and faculty who used modeling produced text which more closely followed a particular prose form" (167). Her results show that students, often confused or uncertain about this novel type of writing, will follow the provided model closely; therefore, the model must be similar to the assignment guidelines provided by the teacher. For example, when asking students to write more descriptively, "the contradiction lies in using as a model a work that is not merely descriptive" (Root 6). If teachers do not read their model texts critically before assigning them, a pedagogical disaster can occur. "[Teachers] need, in selecting prose models, to develop an awareness of the linguistic features which define a particular form of writing, and to select models which present those features in a manner which is most accessible to students" (Stolarek 170). The model must be similar to the writing that students will be asked to produce. I was not trying to force my students into a certain assignment mold, but I did want to help them produce well-written descriptive and reflective stories, rather than long accounts of their entire high school careers. Since providing models works with the idea that students need help in writing this type of essay, care in the choice of model is also evident. What I wanted was a better model,

one that students could follow easily in relation to the assignment guidelines, and that the students could use to succeed in writing the reflective autobiography.

A Model That Did Work

I stood before my class, my legs trembling with fear, for I was about to share something personal with my freshman composition students. I didn't want to tell them anything personal, especially the emotionally charged scene that I was about to describe, but I had to give them a better model, one that would offset the poor model that I had assigned earlier for the reflective autobiography. So, I took a deep breath and began talking. "When I was a senior, I had an encounter with a counselor that changed my entire outlook on my high school," I began shakily. From there I wove an emotional and descriptive tale of an unfair event which questioned my ability to avoid conformity and think for myself. When I finished, I took a deep breath and looked out at my students, with whom I had just shared an intimate, rather revealing moment of my life. My normally quiet class looked back at me for a moment and then burst into life, asking questions and discussing my story. They were relating to my willingness to share my emotions, which I had been encouraging them to do for several weeks. I could literally see the revision occurring for them; they were asking questions about how to apply such measures to their own essays. Finally, a model had worked; it fit, but was it comfortable enough, or was my class still somewhat exposed?

Simone Porrier-Bures has developed a similar personal model that she uses when explaining how to layer narration with reflection. After discussing how to be a good storyteller (narrator), she shares the story of an afternoon walk which ends with an encounter with a dog that she suspects has killed her cat. The story layers reflection, past experiences, emotion, present action, and thoughts related to the main story (1). Her story models how to be a good storyteller, which is exactly what she asks her students to be when writing their own texts.

There are two lessons to learn from these

personal stories provided by teachers. First, teachers must override their own fears regarding personal writing before they can ask their students to do the same. This step is difficult because, after years of being objective and formal, it is hard for teachers to embrace emotion or personal stories (Palmer 22). Only when I modeled how to use emotion in the reflective autobiography were the students able to break through their own personal barriers. Plus, sharing my story helped me to understand what the students had to go through in writing the piece, and it helped me to anticipate problems the students might face. I had difficulty in reflecting on the story, so I could then conclude that some of the students might also need help with this issue. Some teachers also find that having students share their writing with others helps to produce more personal and emotional detail, especially if the student model is chosen with care. Swain says that "by celebrating some children's reflective self-discoveries in the classroom others become inspired to take the risk of introspection" (103). The students with less fear are then able to help the other students to overcome their fears about this type of writing.

Second, this method enables the teacher to share a model that follows the assignment guidelines, but does not provide too much structure for the students. It models description and reflection without giving the students an exact piece of writing, which the students could potentially imitate too much. Since some students tend to overuse models in constructing essays, some teachers are hesitant to use the technique (Stolarek 155). On the other hand, sharing an oral model lacks a key factor in the modeling process—allowing students to see the type of writing in print and final copy. Seeing the textual features of a type of essay is important for learning writers, also (Stolarek 170). Although I could have written down my personal example, I felt that the live retelling of my story was more effective in helping my students to embrace their emotions. Therefore, even though the method worked in my class, I was left feeling that the model fell short of my overall modeling goals, so I went on to search for a print model to use along with my

own personal model.

The Traditional Models

I felt as if nothing that I could write about would have any importance. Who would ever take a 23-year-old seriously, especially if she was reflecting on her (oh so close) childhood? I simply didn't have enough life experience to write anything substantial. Even if I did have something important to write about, I wouldn't have enough time between the present and the event to properly reflect upon the significance of the event. As I tried over and over to write my own personal essay, I found that I had nothing to write about, so I turned to published pieces as models. To my dismay, reading the textbook models made me feel even more inadequate. I could never write anything like that—I hadn't lived a full enough life yet. While trying on the traditional models in my classroom, I felt as if I was wearing someone else's clothes, not my own—they fit, but also felt awkward and constrictive. The models brought on extra feelings of discouragement for me.

In research about modeling the personal essay, many traditional texts are often suggested. For example, Lesley Rex suggests White's "Once More to the Lake" Orwell's "Shooting the Elephant," and Didion's "On Going Home" as models for the personal essay (119). These suggestions are mirrored in many other texts describing the best models for students to use. However, these types of anthologized essays often have drawbacks when used as models for the various forms of the personal essay, the reflective autobiography included.

In 1990, a study was conducted on the ways in which "Once More to the Lake," was classified and discussed in anthologies, which are often used to provide "expert" models of writing for students. In this study, Root looked at 26 different anthologies. Of these anthologies, many classified the essay as being some sort of narrative, descriptive, autobiographical, or "remembering" essay (Root 2-3). Although this essay is often classified as a type of personal writing, its use as a model is a potential disaster for students. "Once More to the Lake" would

be a poor model for the reflective autobiography for several reasons. Even though the essay does model "expert" use of description and reflection (i.e. "There had been no years"), these positive features are outweighed by the essay's drawbacks as a model (White 58). For a beginning writer, this type of reflection might be difficult to replicate. In his study of the essay, Root found that the anthologies often forget the "years of experience" that White had as a writer and as a person (13). Student writers might feel discouraged if they cannot produce similar essays of their own. Moffett sums up this feeling well by saying that essays like White's "merely intimidate some students by implying a competition in which they are bound to lose" (Root 20). A feeling that one has lost, or has not succeeded in writing, is far from what teachers should hope to achieve when applying a model.

The other essays often suggested as models in anthologies hold similar problems for students. Often, these models conflict with specific assignment guidelines; they are difficult to replicate; and they are taken out of context when presented in anthologized form. For example, Joan Didion's "On Going Home" is another cleverly crafted, but potentially overwhelming essay that teachers use as a model for personal writing. Although the essay exemplifies an interwoven fabric of description and reflection, it contains many allusions to World War II and books like *Long Day's Journey into Night* that students may not understand (Didion 48). Students need to understand and relate to the model in order to imitate it. Another such popular essay is George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant," which is descriptive, but complex for students to understand, and therefore difficult to use as a model. Orwell's essay contains political discourse, which is unlikely for students to replicate. In choosing a model, "it would be most helpful if the model essays used in the anthologies that crossed [a teacher's] desk were more in touch with the kind of writing students actually tend to do, reflecting the actual concerns in their lives" (Morgan 323). Choosing an effective model is a difficult and tedious task for teachers. After I looked at these traditional models, I was left won-

dering if there were any appropriate models for my specific reflective autobiography assignment.

A Potentially Better Model

After grudgingly moving away from the traditional clothing, I noticed that I was again exposed, but I didn't want to choose one of my former styles. All I wanted to do was to break from both styles and find something in the middle, something that would fit and protect my class; it would take courage and dedication to do this, but to help my students, I decided to try on something different once again. So, I found something new, but efficient—a combination of sorts and I tried it on. I have decided to use my own personal example along with a written example, but I will critically analyze the example before giving it to my students. My search for a better model had taught me that in choosing techniques for teaching writing, teachers must be careful in their choices, lest their students be harmed by careless planning. My new clothing fit me perfectly—I found the textual model of a reflective autobiography that I had been looking for—Annie Dillard's "A Chase." The model was my style, in my size, and it protected my students and me from the harsh elements of writing and teaching the personal essay.

The model for the reflective autobiography must include emotion, description, and reflection upon a specific event (one event, to avoid a ten-page paper including every detail of a student's high school experience); however, the model cannot be too overwhelming or difficult for students to understand and apply. Annie Dillard's "A Chase" does all of this. The essay details one event from her life, in which she and some friends fire snowballs at a passing car. The car's driver ends up exiting the car and chasing the children through their snow-filled neighborhood (Dillard 23). I can use this essay to show my students how Dillard fully describes this one scene and intertwines reflection throughout the piece to let the reader know that the event, although small, was important to her life and learning. In the second paragraph, she says, "I got in trouble throwing snowballs, and have seldom been happier since" (23). Therefore, I could explain that she applies her

emotion to little incidents, and that this works just as well as it does with traumatic incidents, thus enabling every student to succeed in using this text as a model. Morgan states that teachers "should rely on models that enable students to reflect upon and understand their experiences in a larger social context" (323). Dillard's essay does just this in her last paragraph when she admits, "nothing has required so much of me since as being chased all over Pittsburgh in the middle of winter" (26). My students often find this type of reflection difficult to create, and Dillard's essay provides an example of how to do so.

So, the essay has all the aspects that Stolarek, Root, and Morgan detail as important in a model: 1) It provides a visual piece of text for students to use as a guide in creating their own text. 2) The essay follows my assignment guidelines, so students have a concrete example to follow. 3) It is understandable and clear, using text with which students can relate to and replicate in writing this type of essay. Plus Dillard's essay is a published piece by a mature writer for students to use. Other potential models to be used along with this essay would be a spoken or written personal example from the teacher, or student examples from the same assignment. These all could be beneficial as long as teachers read them critically before deciding to use them to lead students toward achieving success in their own personal writing, as terrifying as the process may be for both student and teacher.

Choosing a model for any type of essay is trying for teachers because they have to be careful and critical in choosing something that comforts the students and gives them the confidence to successfully write the essay. As detailed in the essay above, finding such a model sometimes takes several tries before the best model is found, but the effort is worthwhile if student success in writing is achieved. I know that I will be more careful the next time I choose a model for my students.

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