Seeing Language: Using Non-fiction to Teach Students About Language

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Studying the Non-Fiction Essay

Phyllis Frus McCord writes that it becomes "much easier for students to see that the examples they use... work on many different levels" (758) when they read non-fiction. Personal essays and those written about ordinary experiences contain imagery which is fresh and can capture a student's attention in ways that fiction sometimes cannot. By reading essays about writers' experiences or daily events, the student can see that essays are more than just talking on paper. Metaphors, analogies, and stories make the experience or the object come alive and make the reader care about what happens. I think that high school students, in particular, benefit from studying the organizational structures of non-fiction essays. Three collections make my point. In Sleeping with One Eye Open: Women Writers and the Art of Survival, women share experiences with writing; The Flight of the Iguana: A Side-long View of Science and Nature contains essays by David Quammen, a scientist, for the non-scientist; and Andrei Codrescu's A Craving for Swan comments on common things in life.

Real Writers Also Struggle

In the opening essay, "The Woman Who Slept with One Eye Open: Notes on Being a Writer," Judith Ortiz Cofer transports the reader back to her childhood in Puerto Rico where she heard the tales of women. Through telling the story of Maria Sabida, Ortiz Cofer discusses the "metaphor for the woman/creator" (7) who outsmarts the killer by marrying him. She characterizes the "assassin" as "the destroyer of ambition, drive, and talent—the killer of dreams" (7) as she stresses the importance of retaining the artist's vision. Ortiz Cofer tells anew the need for women's space and time. "The true artist will use her creativity to find a way, to carve the time, to claim a kitchen table, a library carrel, if a room of her own is not possible" (9). In the process of telling stories from her childhood and adult experiences, she shatters myths about space that young writers often carry with them by discussing the "portable room" that one of her students created. The writing student "constructed a notebook..."
that fit her jeans pocket precisely. It had a hard back so that she could write on it while she went around the house or took the kids to the park, or even while grocery shopping" (12). This essay provides an excellent way to discuss the use of the past and childhood stories to describe experiences. Ortiz Cofer illustrates her point about artistic vision through the stories she heard as a child and is now translating from her native language into English. Through her essay she is also translating her experiences and memories from childhood to represent new meanings as an adult.

Like Ortiz Cofer, Sandra Benitez includes stories from her childhood in her essay. She begins her essay “Fire, Wax, Smoke” with the line “I came to writing late” (44). She continues by describing the library of her youth which went up in flames. Benitez describes her memory of the event as watching “stories and smoke commingling” (45). The essay describes both Benitez’s memories and her persistence as a writer. She outlines the trials associated with writing her first novel which now rests in a box under her bed. At the end of the process, she realized that she must “write only about what’s precious . . . about what truly matters” (47) to her. Also, as Ortiz Cofer did, she relates powerful memories about translating language which sparked her writing career. She provides a twist for the reader at the end of the essay to reveal the fallibility of the memory. The library had not burned; it was a post office building. However, Benitez believes that “stories impress themselves on the soft-wax area of our hearts. It is the fire of remembering that sets the wax to melting. We have only to take up a pen, or set fingers to keys. We have only to trust and stories Will come: like sacred smoke rising up to restore and preserve us” (49). Here is a spot where the role of truth can be discussed. Just because a piece of writing is non-fiction does not have to mean that it has to be entirely true.

In a concise essay, “Finding the Groove,” Joy Harjo remembers a moment when music and language meshed in her life. She confesses that she did not understand the concepts of music at the young age, but she describes the scene in the Black Cadillac, the smells and the sounds which left a lasting impression. That afternoon, Harjo “found a way toward the realization of knowledge in this world, a way to hear beyond the ordinary waves of language. A love supreme. A love supreme” (152). Harjo impresses the reader with sound and sights that influenced her writing and imagination. Her extended metaphor mixes music and language into one for the writer.

Non-fiction, like fiction, can contain stories as the essays I have discussed thus far demonstrate. I think that students sometimes view essays as dry, boring, and full of factual information when, in fact, the opposite is true. These are only three examples from the 28 essays in this collection. All stress the importance of women’s space and time. It is not the truth that is so important, according to many of the writers, rather it is the memory and listening to the heart.

A Purpose for Stories in Essays

Writings by scientists bring to mind theories and formulas that would seem of little use in the English classroom. However, I have found a number of fine science essayists who are writing for the general public and are useful for teaching writing styles and strategies. David Quammen’s The Flight of the Iguana: A Sidelong View of Science and Nature was one of the first books I drew essays from when I taught high school. His essays are accessible and show the students how to organize thoughts as well as how to mix metaphors from other disciplines to make a point clearer for a general audience. One of the things that many science essayists do particularly well is play with language. Quammen does this as he paints vivid word pictures of animals that we do not run into on a daily basis, so the reader can visualize the problem and the wonder of nature. In “The Face of a Spider: Eyeball to Eyeball with the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly,” Quammen introduces the reader to his encounter with a hundred black widow spiders who were “frolicking on [his] desk” (3). Through physical description and theorizing about life, he discusses the spiders who
inhabit his office. These creatures are compared to rabbits multiplying, and the females are described as growing to the size of “plump huckleberries” (3). The spider’s eggs are compared to poppy seeds. Quammen moves from physical descriptions to a brief discussion of Jain religion to make his point about the moral question that frames his essay. The reader now has the clear picture in his mind about the problem at hand in the office and can empathize with both the problem and the moral dilemma facing the author. Rather than a technical/scientific explanation of the spiders’ reproduction, Quammen provides a layman’s discussion of how spiders reproduce and the number of spiders he faces on his desk.

Quammen structures his essay with a question which he asks three times during the text: “How should a human behave toward the members of other living species?” This general question has broader implications and can lead to students writing about their own experiences in similar situations. Many students have opinions on a number of larger topics but perhaps have never framed them in relationship to a spider or other small creature. The repetition of the question drives home the point that the author has to seriously consider a life even though he is terrified of this many spiders in his office space. He relies on the comparisons to common things, draws on philosophy of the Jain religion and then finally describes the physical aspects of the spider that we find repulsive. He attempts to put a human face on the spider by making eye contact with it but cannot because of a spider’s physical differences from a human’s.

The remaining essays in the collection deal with similar dilemmas in nature. Quammen begins “Turnabout: the Well-Kept Secret of Carnivorous Plants” with his absurd sense of humor by comparing carnivorous plants to Vincent Price and the plant in The Little Shop of Horrors. He describes a plant which “has been caught in the act of digesting mice,” small lizards, and frogs before relating the story of F. W. Oliver who witnessed a meadow of plants eat six million butterflies in August 1911 (48). The integration of this story can be compared to the use of stories in Sleeping with One Eye Open. Students can be taught to ask questions about the purpose of a story in an essay. Does it support the main point and contribute to the reader’s understanding of the subject? Where is it inserted and how does the author refer back to the story? Essays from both collections discussed so far show students that stories are not just dropped into essays; rather, they have a distinct purpose and place in relaying an author’s point and speaking to the intended audience.

The rest of the essay is more scientific but is still written in language for the layman. Darwin’s work with carnivorous plants and descriptions of the ecosystems which support these plants is the focus of the remaining pages. Quammen still infuses humor at the end, however, when he writes ironically about carnivorous plants that, like rattlesnakes and black widow spiders, “go to great lengths to avoid gratuitous violence” (53). He also compares the carnivorous plants to the runts of the litter, having to fight for nourishment.

Extending Ideas Into Metaphors

Finally, A Craving for Swan, a collection of essays by Andrei Codrescu completes my discussion. Codrescu composes short essays of one to three pages about everyday things in which he extends the ordinary into something uncommon. His essays are an excellent way to show students how to personify inanimate objects such as computers, to extend their ideas, and to create metaphors. In “Buying,” the act of shopping is dissected. He uses education as the metaphor to discuss experiences with shopping and a fellow Romanian lost “in one of those humongous California shopping malls . . . ” (98). He continues by playing with the meaning of the word “buy”: “The strongest form of dissent an American can articulate is ’I’m not buying that!’ And ’that’ refers to everything from an idea to a plan of action” (98). The reader sees a number of viewpoints as Codrescu continues to twist the meanings of words.

One theme which Codrescu explores is the role of technology in our lives. In “Links” he dis-
cusses how machines merge with one another through a comparison to marriage and with a reference to 1984 which runs through the essay. Near the end "the telephone-answering-clock-radio-phone-tape-deck-turntable-speakers-TV married the computer" (85). The essay ends with the human being plugged into the computer. In the next essay, “The Disillusioned,” he writes a letter relating his disappointment with the computer. So many things were promised! But the computer has not met his expectations. Both of these essays could be considered dated since they were written in the 1980s; however, they may provide an opportunity to look at technology since the time they were published. Technology, computers, and the Internet are so much more pervasive in our lives today than ten years ago.

I think the essays in the collections which I have discussed here prove McCord’s point which began this essay. There are certainly many more collections of essays which also can be used to teach students about language and extending ideas. Students need to see ways to expand their ideas before they can create multi-layered essays of their own. Non-fiction is a tool which can help them accomplish this.

Works Cited