1998

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Recommended Citation

Waterbury, Pamela (1998) "The Assignment: Transforming Students Into Writers and Teachers of Writing," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 14: Iss. 2, Article 17.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1422>

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Teaching Teachers

The Assignment: Transforming Students Into Writers and Teachers of Writing

Pamela Waterbury

The trouble with bad student writing is the trouble with all bad writing. It isn't serious and it doesn't tell the truth.

— Eudora Welty

Silence falls in the room as the students begin reading student models of their next assignment. The hush is not unlike the hush you hear at the most profound moments of a church service. This moment of reverence is not unique. It occurs every time these student papers are read by each group of students I've used them with—pre-service teachers, first-year students, continuing education students, and even graduate students who have been in their own classrooms. As an experienced teacher of twenty-five years, I'm always amazed at the magic of this moment and awed by the power of the autobiographical writing assignment.

Ten years ago I began my college teaching career as one of the roaming adjuncts, teaching first-year composition courses at Grand Valley State College in Allendale, Michigan and Aquinas College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. While I found my life as a traveling composition teacher exhausting, I will always be grateful for the opportunity it afforded me to see first hand the difference between “real writing” and canned student writing. That experience forever shaped the way I taught composition and gave me the courage to teach writing for prospective writing teachers out of my heart and not just my head.

At Aquinas, I initially taught composition following the standard rhetorical approach; at Grand Valley, I was introduced to an assignment that forever changed the way I would teach composition—a thematic autobiographical writing assignment

(“Assignment”). Seeing ownership and the quality of writing that was produced out of the autobiographical writing assignment juxtaposed to the writing produced by my students at Aquinas made me a believer.

I was neither a better teacher of writing nor were my students better writers at Grand Valley. It was the Assignment that led them into their best writing selves. Watching students working as writers and believing in themselves as writers fueled my willingness to use the Assignment whenever I taught writing classes. Although there have been times I worried the Assignment wasn't academic enough or was too personal, my students' authentic writing convinced me of its importance. One student wrote on her self-evaluation of her paper, “There are drafts all over my floor at home, and it was amazing how involved in the piece I became. I loved having the time to revise. . . . Writing this paper helped confirm what is important to me.”

Over the years, I've incorporated my own approaches to the Assignment, but much of it remains the same. Always the Assignment takes on a life of its own given to it by the student writers. As I refined the Assignment and got better at teaching it, their writing became even richer. The Assignment is valid not only in my classroom but works in other communities: variations of it have been used by colleagues and former students who now teach. A friend who teaches in St. Louis, Missouri used the thematic autobiography assignment successfully

with her first-year college writing classes, and now with her seventh-grade urban middle school students. She too stands in awe of the Assignment.

The Assignment prompted a student to drop off another draft of the paper in my mailbox just before she graduated from Aquinas four years after she began it. The attached note read: "Thought you might like to see the final draft. I think I finally got it right." And she did. But she had been getting it right all along—only she finally understood what the writing was about. What about this Assignment prompts such involvement on the part of students as both writers and readers of their fellow students' work?

The Assignment works because it asks students to write truthfully and seriously about material they care tremendously about—their own lives. It offers them an opportunity to develop rich insights about their pasts, their present lives, and inevitably their futures. It offers them the opportunity to use these insights to communicate with others and to write something that can potentially change others' lives. And finally, it pushes them as writers to hone their work and beautifully craft it so others will want to read it.

While this Assignment is important for any class of writers, I believe it is an essential assignment for prospective writing teachers and future teachers of language arts. It is an assignment that turns them into writers, shows them how expressive writing can be used successfully in the classroom, and invites them to make discoveries about who they are.

Background to the Assignment

We begin the semester talking and writing about our experiences with writing—negative and positive—in order to distill our thoughts about the writing process. Students continue building a more realistic picture of how writers work and discover that "writers are made and not born" as we read and reflect on essays about writing: Peter Elbow's article "Freewriting," William Staffords's "A Way of Writing," and the chapter "Learning Styles and Writing" from *Wrestling With Your Angels* by Janet Hagberg. Once we've dispelled the myths about writing, they are more open and receptive to finding themselves as writers. We immediately launch into our own writing. After being introduced to prewriting techniques of freewriting, clustering, and listing, they write first drafts about each of the following: an event, person, place, or artifact that has influenced their lives. At the same time, they are reading models of published writers' work on similar themes.

After they've chosen one of their journals to polish, we spend almost three more weeks workshoping their drafts for revision of content, editing for

style, and a final editing for issues of correctness. While they are working on these drafts, I'm modeling ways of crafting—using specific details, sensory details, beginnings and endings and titles, and weaving in thematic statements using both published writers and student writers' work. As they work as writers, they read and reread their texts (*Make Your Words Work* by Gary Provost and *Inside Out* by Dan Kirby and Tom Liner with Ruth Vinz) about qualities of good writing, applying the appropriate issues to their writing.

I purposefully begin with a shorter writing assignment to let them practice expressive writing at each stage both as a writer and a teacher coach for other writers. I also want to model for them that not *all* writing needs to be polished. Since they had choices about which of their original journals they wanted to polish, they've had an opportunity to discard writing they weren't invested in. Throughout this experience they are responding to each other's work using guidelines I've adapted from Peter Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers* and my own experiences in writing groups.

The Assignment

I introduce the Assignment (see Appendix A) and reassure them I'll talk/walk them through each stage of the process; even experienced writers feel daunted by the assignment. They read several published writer's models of thematic autobiographies: Nora Ephron's "Shaping Up Absurd," Raymond Carver's, "My Father's Life," and Alice Walker's "Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self." However, the real jump into the assignment occurs when they read samples of previous students' autobiographies. They are told those students have chosen to share their papers as literary models (with or without names) for each new generation of autobiography writers because they want to share their stories. At this moment the writing becomes more than an assignment: it becomes real, an opportunity to write a paper that communicates with other students about subjects they care passionately about.

They research their themes by writing a Steppingstones to their life based on a model I've created from Ira Progoff's assignment in *At a Journal Workshop* (see Appendix B). After they've read through all their previous journals and free written about possible themes, we conference about their topics. In the conference, I reassure them a theme they've settled on is "OK," or I urge them to write about the topic that seems more important to them even though it feels *forbidden* in the academic world. Themes that are chosen are far ranging: Growing up Catholic, Growing up in an Alcoholic Home, Caretaker for the Wounded, Loving

the Natural World, the Loss of a Parent, Growing up in a Large Family, etc. Next they do a “Steppingstones” to their theme and from that choose three or four “chapters” to use to build the paper.

I model on the board my own Steppingstones to the theme of an “outsider” and discuss why I’d include certain “chapters” and not others. This provides them with an approach to organizing their material, shows them how to be selective of material—not everything belongs or makes for powerful writing—and helps them think about how to prove their theme exists over a period of time. I use the image of different beads on a necklace held together by one thread which I heard from Professor Sharon Whitehill, an English Department colleague and writing teaching mentor at Grand Valley State University. I also remind them we are following the same process we use when we research an expository topic and selectively use material.

At this point, they draft, share their drafts, and continue to draft. They read “Sound of Angels” a student essay in *Student Writers at Work and in the company of others writers: Bedford Prizes* which we discuss as a model of good writing. We look at the use of specific place, people, and context details. We analyze how the theme was developed, restated, and reflected upon. Beginnings, endings, and transitions are noted as a way of seeing possible approaches for their own papers. In this essay, they vividly see the power of recurring images and symbols in enhancing theme.

As writers, they struggle hard with this draft. It’s very difficult for them to see the first-draft flaws of their writing after having completed the polished journal. Once again, they learn we write in drafts and make our discoveries about what we have to say in the writing.

At second-draft stage, I often have them free write for the deeper theme and search for the telling details that might become recurring images or symbols in their writing. I do this by engaging them in a prewriting technique of listing colors, smells, sounds, music, objects and so on that are part of the theme. In this draft and the third draft, we talk about possible approaches to transitions and beginnings and endings.

Each draft is workshopped first with a partner and finally on a second or third draft with a larger group (see Appendix C). First and even second drafts are read aloud so they respond only to global issues. By the third draft they are ready to share printed drafts for editing purposes. They know the drill since they have practiced it with the earlier and shorter expressive writing assignments. Once again they have an opportunity to practice responding to student writing in conferences, workshops, and editing sessions. They are also involved in reflecting

on their own paper (see Appendix D). After my years as Writing Specialist tutoring writers, I’m convinced that the practice of this process is essential. Every student taught me something new about working with student writers. Mostly I learned the importance of being present to their work and truly listening. The richness of their stories emerged in the presence of an interested listener saying “tell me more.” An articulate and wonderfully aware student described her similar discovery about listening: “The autobiographical assignment is as much about listening as it is about finding one’s voice. We want to help students find their voices on the page, and this essay is a way of letting them experiment and entertain ideas in their own voice. As teachers, we need to be listeners.”

My role as midwife to their stories comes in the later drafts. Usually, I only respond to second drafts, which have been word processed, for content revision. We conference individually at the third-draft stage of the writing over issues of style, syntax, and correctness. We talk about their writing issues in the context of their paper, not through abstract and general grammar rules, although I pull out our handbook and show them how to connect the rules to their papers. For purposes of my evaluation of the paper, I provide a rubric before the final draft is due (see Appendix E).

The completion of the assignment is celebrated in an oral reading of their papers in small groups. I have experimented with various formats for the sharing of the writing—a written response from another student in the class, sometimes I’ve even exchanged papers with another class. I’m most satisfied with the oral presentation. Once again they hear the power of their stories by listening to their words echo for other students. The laughter, tears, and stunned silence at the beauty of the words tells them their writing worked: the writing resonated for others.

Doubts, Questions, and Answers

At various points with this Assignment I’ve wrestled with questions of privacy. Usually, it’s not the students who raise the issue; it’s my own censor who worries about turning the assignment into “confessional writing.” I handle the issue in class by talking about the writing as being “real writing” not writing for a therapy session: it’s writing that is designed for a public audience. We also talk about real writers exploring the tough issues in life. While I acknowledge the pain of the themes that involve death, loss, abuse, and disillusionment on a personal level, I also focus on the issues of writing so as not to play therapist. When a student needs professional support, I help him or her find it. Not all students explore painful topics; most explore topics

that capture the beauty of their lives. Students have written wonderfully evocative pieces about their love of nature, celebrations of special relationships with a parent or grandparent, and nostalgic stories of growing up in large and close extended families.

This Assignment, however personal, readies them for the real writing their students are going to share with them. If they do not know who they are and are uncomfortable with lives different from their own, they will never be capable of responding to the gifts of the lives that future students will present to them in writing. As writing teachers, we see into our students' private worlds through their words. Receptivity to these gifts of self, comes only through self-knowledge as a person and writer.

Another question I often struggle with is the amount of time (the first half of the semester) this Assignment takes in the course of a semester for these pre-service teachers. Yet, because of the time they invest in the Assignment, they experience the real writing process. Too few of our writing assignments provide student writers with sufficient incubation time to become immersed in their stories and words. They never have time to dig deeply enough to get at the richest meaning. None of the students has lamented the time required for the project. In fact, most agree with the student who said, "I'm still trying to figure out how those other autobiographical essay assignments I wrote failed to do what your assignment did for me. Maybe it was because we had to work on it for so long and I felt more invested in it."

From my own experiences as a student writer at both the secondary and undergraduate level, when my only experience with writing was expository, I know that writing in classrooms is primarily an exercise. My students' descriptions of their writing experiences at the secondary and college level confirm that even today most students spend little time with expressive writing. Most of their writing experiences involve academic expository writing or research writing. While these forms of writing are tremendously valuable, they are not the primary or only kind of writing secondary students need to experience. If pre-service teachers never experience the excitement of hearing their words resonate, they'll never encourage the development of the writing voices and lives in their own students. One student said, "I was so tired of having to stifle my voice in academic papers, always worrying about whether or not to use 'I,' that telling my own story, something where I was the authority, became the most freeing writing assignment."

Student Voices

When the doubts and questions crop up, I only have to remember back to the student dropping her

paper off in my mailbox four years after she first completed it for the class. Or I recall the voices of former students who discovered and rediscovered themselves as writers through the assignment:

The autobiography was a "turning point" in my writing, and a very important one. I learned about developing my own voice and about including dialogue. I learned to "loosen up" a little, to relax while writing, not criticizing and second-guessing myself with every sentence.

I especially liked the autobiographical essay. I had fun digging into the past and expressing myself in ways I had never done before. I probably grew the most as a writer and learned the most about writing and teaching writing through that project.

I always thought the self-discovery that came about in the writing process was something that was subject to the writer's control. I found that the self-discovery comes when the writer reads what he/she has printed on the page. . . . The process leads the writer to the discovery and the ideas.

What I always remember is you writing on my paper: "tell me more." And I would dig for the details—the smells, the colors, anything that would make it more real for the reader. I tell my students the same thing today.

What amazed all of us as we talked about our essays in small groups was how hard we worked on them. We wanted them to be good. We wanted our voices to sound authentic; we wanted our readers to understand how we felt.

The Writers

The Assignment isn't based on some magical formula that makes it work: it works because it asks students to be real writers who take their work seriously and tell their stories truthfully. They become writers of stories and listeners who encourage others' stories—they become writers and teachers of writing.

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About the Author

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Appendix A Autobiographical Essay

"The unexamined life is not worth living."
— Socrates

Telling "our stories" has an oral and written tradition in all cultures. It is a way of passing on our personal and collective histories. Furthermore, writing autobiographically allows us to see what has shaped us, helps us to understand how the past informs our present, and encourages us to order our future. As writers, it permits us to hone and practice writing skills on material with which we are expert—our lives.

As writing teachers, autobiographical writing will be one of the best tools we can use with our students. Most of the successful writing our students produce will come from personal experience writing. It is the area they are most expert in and have the most to say about, and perhaps most important, are most invested in exploring. As subject matter, it is ideal because they practice new writing skills on material with which they are familiar.

The Assignment

Your assignment is to write a five-to seven-page autobiographical essay or memoir based on a theme in your life. I will take you through each of the com-

posing stages—prewriting, drafting, revision, editing, and proofreading. Keep in mind, your papers will be different and reflect the uniqueness of your themes and voices. Although I will provide both published authors' essays and past students' essays as models, there is no "right way" to complete this paper. As we work with this assignment, we will continue to define what "good writing" means. Besides honesty, specific details—sensory and cultural/context—stories or "onces," the writing must have a coherent theme and appropriate organization and style. Issues of correctness—usage and punctuation—will be addressed during the editing and proofreading stages.

Your grade for this project will involve both an assessment of the process you were involved in (workshopping, conferencing, revision, etc.) and the quality of the final product.

Appendix B Steppingstones Assignment

This exercise, which is based loosely on an exercise developed by Ira Progoff, will help you find an autobiographical theme for your mid-term paper.

1. Recalling Key Events

When we refer to steppingstones, we mean those events or experiences that come spontaneously to mind as you reflect on your life from the very beginning to the present. They are the milestones or markers or passages that have helped shape who you have become. They are not always positive or productive events: they may involve pain or failure. These events may include external firsts (falling in love, a death, first move) or they may involve less tangible moments (shyness, an encounter with prejudice, confrontation with illness, loss of family through divorce). Limit your list to nine to twelve items. Your list might look something like this:

I was born in Lansing, Michigan, but my real home was the woods and turquoise waters of Torch Lake. I was raised Catholic and felt different because of it. I was afraid of making mistakes in school.

I was never quite in rhythm as a ballet dancer or cheerleader.

I fell in love with reading and writing and hid it from friends most of my teen years.

I saw racial prejudice directed toward a best friend and hated it.

My faith, beliefs, and assurance about goodness in the universe were turned upside down during my college years.

I was introduced to the music of life, the pain of poverty and drugs, and the beauty of ethnic diversity by my students in an inner-city high school.

My parents divorced, and I went East without a

map, losing my way on the cobblestone paths and rotaries of Boston.
I returned to the Midwest and became grounded in family life and children.
I struggled to use my writer's voice.

When you have completed your list, read it over and reflect on what you discover. Complete the following open-ended statements:

1. As I wrote this, I felt...
2. As I reread this, I noticed or discovered...

II. Free Write About Possible Themes

After completing the steppingstones exercise think about themes that are true for your life. All of us have more than one theme that fits, so list at least three. Themes might include a personality trait, an interest or hobby, a relationship with a person, a particular momentous event, etc. A theme does not have to be dramatic or painful. One student wrote about growing up in a large family, another wrote about being the oldest, others have written about how they are like a parent; some have explored the impact of a death or divorce on their lives, and another wrote about being a caretaker of wounded pets and people. Obviously, there is no right theme. Free write about why each theme fits your life. How does it connect to your life as a whole not just one segment?

Appendix C **Student Response Guidelines for** **Autobiographical Essay**

Read through the paper several times. You may even want to read it aloud. Respond to each of the following as completely as you can, so the writer benefits from your thoughtful comments.

1. What details or passages stood out for you in the paper? Why?
2. What main idea or impression did you get? What theme is the writer trying to convey? What details convey this especially effectively?
3. Discuss aspects of craftsmanship the paper exhibits:
 - shows doesn't just tell
 - use of recurring imagery
 - effective beginning and ending (coming full circle)
 - dialogue
 - sensory details
 - context details
 - voice
 - style issues discussed in class
 - title woven in effectively
 - omits needless words

4. What distracted or made you stumble as a reader (paragraphing, grammar, punctuation, and spelling issues)?

5. What did you identify with, and why?

6. Make any other comments that let the writer "see" the paper through your personal lens.

Appendix D **Writer's Evaluation of His/Her** **Autobiographical Essay**

After discussing your work on the autobiographical essay assignment, recommend a grade for your paper. Your responses to the following questions should help you determine your assessment:

1. Did you work at each draft in a timely and committed manner? Explain.
2. Did you use feedback you received from classmates and me to make appropriate revisions? Explain.
3. Did you provide serious feedback to other members of the class?
4. Did you make use of the Provost and Kirby texts and class information about qualities of good writing to revise your work? What did you work at revising?
5. What grammar, style, and punctuation issues did you try to correct and improve?
6. What are you most satisfied with and least satisfied with about your paper? Why?
7. To what extent have you met the criteria on the rubric for this assignment?
8. What rating or grade would you give yourself for the assignment (excellent, very good, good, satisfactory or a letter grade).

Appendix E **Teacher Evaluation of the** **Autobiographical Essay**

I draw a line underneath each of the following statements. At the far left I write the word WEAK. At the far right, I write the word STRONG. Then I place a mark at the point in the line that best indicates how weak or how strong that point is in the paper.

1. **THEME:** Your theme is specific and meaningful. You've stated it clearly at the end of your lead, repeated it at key points in your essay, and restated it in your conclusion.

2. **EVENTS:** experience is particular and specific to your life. Because it is reflective and significant, it touches on the universal. Events come from all phases of your life and effectively prove your theme. You "show" your theme through scenes and examples.

3. **PEOPLE:** The people are alive and real to me. Your specific details and dialogue make me see, hear, and feel them.

4. PLACE: You've put me in a particular place with specific concrete and sensory details. Your images and metaphors help enhance my awareness of the place and its impact on you.

5. CONTEXT: You specifically identify people, places, products, and sayings that reveal the times in which you lived.

6. ORGANIZATION: Your paper is easy to follow. The transitions between your scenes connect them to the theme or reflect conscious craftsmanship. Your paragraphing is correct. The paragraphs are unified, points clearly related, and transitions handled smoothly.

7. VOICE: Fresh, honest writing. I hear you talking (without clichés or self-consciousness).

8. OMITTS NEEDLESS WORDS: You have eliminated needless, weak, and empty words.

9. LEAD, CONCLUSION, AND TITLE: Your lead pulls me in with a story (dialogue, example or fact) which is original and relevant to your theme. Your conclusion comes full circle back to some part of your lead, and gives me a positive and "finished"

feeling. Your title is clever, lively, and focused, and is woven throughout the paper, not just tacked on at the end.

10. EDITING: Your paper shows careful editing and attention to correctness issues of:

Usage/Grammar
Punctuation
Spelling
Manuscript Form

11. PROCESS: You have made effective use of the stages of writing we have focused on in class. Your drafts have been completed on time so that you could take advantage of your classmates' comments and my comments as you revised. You contributed to your fellow students' papers with honest and sensitive comments.

12. OVERALL IMPRESSION: My subjective impression is positive. Your theme is honest, thoughtful, and interesting. Your topic is clearly important to you and would be of interest to other readers. I see you working at your craftsmanship as a writer by striving for fresh language, images, metaphors, and symbols.