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Expanding the Role of the Personal Narrative

Janell Cleland and Jodi Wirt

Our dream was to teach an untracked freshman English class. We wanted to create a curricula that valued process learning, reflection, and collaboration and authentic assessment.

At the end of the first year of teaching our newly created curricula, we sat at Jodi's kitchen table, informally reflecting on the pluses and minuses of what we had done. As we talked, we began to appreciate the important role the personal narrative played in making our first year go so well. Using the personal narrative in our first unit served as a way to help students get to know each other. Helping each other with narratives created the need for collaboration and provided students with the opportunity to interact and make meaning with text. Thus, a sense of community was established while students became aware of their own learning processes.

Through the entire narrative unit, students kept all of their reader responses, freewrites, author circle comments, revisions, and reflections on class and small group discussions in a required three-ring binder. As students completed the final draft of their personal narratives, they were asked to assemble portfolios which documented their learning process. Students examined the contents of their three-ring binders, and selected those documents which assisted them in creating their own personal narratives. In addition, the students were required to

explain how a particular response to literature, a freewrite, a group discussion, an authors' circle comment, or a grading criteria aided their learning. To approach the monumental task of explaining all of this and of showing how reading, writing, listening, and speaking became part of one process, we will provide an overview of the entire narrative unit by organizing the article in the same manner as students organized their personal narrative portfolios.

Section I—Responses to Literature

The literature selected for the personal narrative unit is chosen for two reasons. First, students are asked to experiment with ways of making meaning or interacting with the text. We want the students to begin to realize that meaning is "derived from the interaction between the content and structure of the author's message and the experiences and prior knowledge of the reader" (Smith 631). Students experiment with "bookmarks" (Crafton 145-146), "free writing" (Zemelman and Daniels 84), "clustering" (Zemelman and Daniels 135), and "written conversation" (Crafton 195) as they read numerous short stories and poems. Second, the literature allows students to see how characters recall and gain insight from a variety of experiences, an important characteristic of a personal narrative. So literature for our students has become what

Murray in *A Writer Teaches Writing* defines as a **prevision** experience (qtd in *Writing for Learning*) because students' responses to the literature create numerous "zero drafts"—Wolfe and Reising's term for a collection of pieces which students can come back to when they must begin a first draft (6). All of the students' responses to literature are filed in the three-ring binder.

One of Janell's students, Cecilia, selected her bookmark (Figure 1) in response to *All I Really Need to Know I Learned In Kindergarten* as one of the "zero drafts" to include in this section of the portfolio. Students include in this section of the portfolio all of those responses to literature which have the potential to become personal narratives.

Section II—The Characteristics of an Effective Personal Narrative

At this point we introduce sample narratives from previous students, and we ask the students to fill the margins of these photocopied samples with comments regarding what they liked/disliked as they read each sample. The three student narratives that we use have been carefully chosen to illustrate a variety of strengths and weaknesses that typically emerge with freshmen writers. The students meet in groups and condense their comments into a list of "things to do" and "things to avoid" when writing a narrative. We encourage them to use the student samples and the literature to provide examples for each of the comments on their list. These lists are written on newsprint and a spokesperson for each group presents their findings to the class. As that spokesperson mentions a characteristic also listed on another group's list, students highlight the commonality on their newsprint. After all groups present their lists, they post their newsprints on the classroom wall.

This section of the students' portfolios might include the samples of literature or the student narratives that students felt had the strongest impact on them as they drew conclusions about effective narration.

Section III—Assessment Instrument

The next day we return to the newsprint in search of the elements of an effective narrative

that we all seem to agree upon. We list these on a separate sheet of newsprint, and they become the components of our Personal Narrative Assessment instrument. Each class may choose different ways to word the characteristics of an effective narrative, but we find that the similarities between classes are striking as a result of having read the same literature and student samples. As a class we decide on the point value for this piece of writing, and we weight the various categories depending on how important we feel they are in light of the entire narrative process. Wiggins discusses the value of "Teaching to the (Authentic) Text," and we feel we have successfully accomplished this by clarifying and setting high standards before the students even begin the actual process of writing their narratives. The assessment instrument guides the process rather than serving as an "after-the-fact device for checking up on what students have learned" (42).

This section of the portfolio includes the actual assessment instrument. Students may hand-write their copies, or a volunteer may type them, and we photocopy them for the class (Figure 2).

Section IV—First Draft

Now students return to their three-ring binder to see if their zero drafts display or have the potential to display the characteristics of an effective personal narrative. Cecilia's bookmark (Figure 1) provided the ideas for her first draft. She decided to explore the impact her great-grandparents had on her. The quality of this first draft is enhanced by the fact that Cecilia immediately incorporates the characteristics of an effective narrative as a result of creating the assessment instrument prior to her first draft.

This section of the portfolio simply includes the first draft.

Section V—Author's Circle

Upon completion of the first draft, we meet in one large authors' circle (Harste, Short, Burke 20) to read that first draft aloud to gain suggestions that will guide the revision process. This is the only time during the year that we remain as a whole class for this process (we generally break

FIGURE 1

<p>Bookmark My Heroes</p> <p>My heroes are my grandparents because of the kind of people that they were. They raised my dad, his brothers and sisters and cousins. They would sell land or anything needed to be sold so you could go to school and buy them the basics needed. If it was your birthday or something, they'd ask you what your favorite food was and what you wanted as a gift and they'd try to get it for you as well as making your favorite food. They loved each other til the day they died. If it wasn't for them my family would be scattered everywhere and they would never had achieved the things they did.</p>

into groups of four or five); however, we discovered that it is well worth the time spent (almost a week) for two major reasons: as students share their personal narratives, a strong sense of community is established. We hear about relatives, pets, and vacations, and we share in memorable events that have affected that student. It also allows us to direct the students' first attempts at author circle comments, thus modeling appropriate responses. We have found it helpful to use the following form (Figure 3) to help the student listeners focus their attention during the actual reading and to ensure that each author obtains useful comments. After each reading, we each tell our "memorable moment" and then we go around the circle again and ask questions. Students immediately want answers to their questions so the author answers each question (once again allowing us to get to know them better and extending the bond among classmates). At the conclusion of the questioning round, we hand all our forms to the authors so they can use them during their revision processes.

FIGURE 3

<p>Authors' Circle</p> <p>Author _____</p> <p>Reactions by _____</p> <p>Date _____</p> <p>"Memorable Moments" After hearing the piece of writing read aloud, what is the most memorable part for you? Why do you think this part stayed in your mind?</p> <p>Questions: As a reader, what do you not understand? Where could you use further information/detail?</p>

This section of the portfolio includes the specific comments students found useful while making their revisions. By asking the students to include the forms they actually used, we not only can see how many comments they incorporated, but we can also determine which students are consistently providing useful feedback.

Section VI—Second Draft

This section of the portfolio includes the draft that evolved as a result of authors' circle comments and questions. The changes from the first draft are highlighted.

Section VII—Editing

Throughout the writing process, we emphasize that revision and editing are two different components of the writing process. Therefore, in spite of the amount of time we have already spent on this unit, we cannot overlook the need to introduce the concept of editing. As we read students' responses to literature, freewrites, and rough drafts, we notice, perhaps, that compound sentences are a problem for many of our students, so we conduct a mini-lesson on punctuating compound sentences before students enter

FIGURE 2

Narrative Grading Form 2nd Period	
Beginning	_____ pts
<p>The author makes sure the audience keeps reading by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> avoiding too much summary starting with action making original comparisons describing setting using flashback creating suspense 	
Middle	_____ pts
<p>The author</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> selects those details (specifics) which lead to a discovery uses dialogue brings in other characters 	
End	_____ pts
<p>The author</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> shows that s/he has discovered something includes personal feelings 	
Mechanics/Spelling	_____ pts
<p>The final draft</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> is free of spelling errors contains no compound sentence punctuation errors 	
Time and Effort	_____ pts
<p>There is evidence that the author</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> is interested in the topic has spend time making effective revisions 	
Total Points	_____

into an editing triad. Correcting compound sentence punctuation is only one of the editing triad's responsibilities; in addition, the triad is responsible for spelling. (Students have also been given class time in the computer lab, and we have shown them how to take advantage of spell check.) Obviously, we do not limit the editors from helping with any of the other conventions; in fact, we encourage them to use their expertise. This step clearly shows our reluctant "revisers" the difference between revision and editing.

At the end of the editing day, we ask students to record what "problems" editors have noticed. Then students are asked to create a plan for correcting those errors. This reflection is included in the personal narrative portfolio.

Section VIII—Optional Drafts

As we examine the portfolios, we are amazed to find that many of our students have included additional drafts as a result of seeking authors'

circle comments from peers outside their classroom and from parents. This feedback generates the need for additional drafts, and those students who create this opportunity for themselves clearly state in their reflection letter at the end of the portfolio how they began to recognize and apply useful critiques.

Section IX—The Final Draft

Because we believe that process and growth are as important as the quality of the final draft, students are responsible for highlighting those revisions that have occurred from first to final draft. This step allows students to examine the extent to which they participate in the process. Because the end-product grading criteria has been established before the students' first drafts evolved and they can see for themselves the revisions they have made, students no longer need to wonder if they have a good paper.

This highlighted copy is the second to the last section of the narrative portfolio. Students are proud and excited to release their personal narratives for publication.

Section X—Final Reflection

Before students begin their final reflection on the narrative process, it is enlightening for them to review all of the experiences that have helped them create their own narratives. Lisa created a cluster (Figure 4) to examine the process she used to create her personal narrative. However, not all students are as self-directed as Lisa, so as a class we discuss how we develop a definition of a narrative and the process we used to create our own. Two important realizations occur at this point. Students understand, some for the first time, how the literature and writing work together. The other realization is that after all the time we have invested in this learning experience, we have only put in place an end-product assessment tool. Therefore, as a class we devise a checklist (Figure 5) that rewards process and growth. The checklist not only helps students organize their portfolios, but it also provides them with all of the information they need in order to reflect on their learning process.

The final section of the personal narrative portfolio is a letter written by the student to the

FIGURE 4

teacher in which the student reflects on the entire process by considering the following questions:

- What part of your narrative are you most proud of and why?
- What changes did you make from your first to final draft?
- Which revision was most effective? Why?
- Which strategy was most effective during your learning process?
- If you had the opportunity, what would you still revise?
- What do you feel you need to work on in your next piece of writing?

This letter serves as the beginning of the next learning experience, for students should now

employ the strategies which work for them, and they have set at least one goal for growth.

Our expanded use of the personal narrative allows our students to examine their own learning process in a way that would not have been possible with traditional separation of writing, literature, and speaking. Students not only create meaning from their personal experiences, but they also create meaning from their personal interactions with literature and each other. This one unit models the environment, procedures, and standards for the remainder of the year. By the end of October, these fourteen-year-olds are already using reading, writing, listening, and speaking as interactive processes that can no longer be isolated. John Mayher (1990) suggests that "there is no doubt that our holistic ways of knowing are

FIGURE 5

Personal Narrative Portfolio	
Process (10 Points)	
_____ Responses to literature	_____ Second draft
_____ Characteristics of effective personal narratives	_____ Editing reflection
_____ Assessment instrument	_____ Optional drafts
_____ First draft	_____ Final draft
_____ Author circle comments	_____ Reflection
Effective Revisions (15 points)	
1 2 3 4 5 Is there evidence that author circle comments were incorporated?	
1 2 3 4 5 Is there evidence that content and/or organizational revisions were attempted?	
1 2 3 4 5 Was the final draft edited for spelling and mechanics?	
Reflection (15 points)	
1 2 3 4 5 Is it clear to the student which writing strategy was most effective?	
1 2 3 4 5 Is there a clear understanding of how the revisions improved the paper?	
1 2 3 4 5 Were goals established for the next piece of writing?	
Total points _____	

best exemplified by and rooted in our personal stories....They not only help us consolidate and frame our knowledge of the world, but...are particularly crucial in helping us understand human motives and actions"(99). Our personal narrative portfolios provide a classroom application of Mayher's belief, and the portfolio has become the vehicle that helps us and our students to appreciate and explore the powerful role the narrative can play as a "way of knowing."

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