

1990

Becoming a Community of Writers: Life Book Writing

Mary Branding

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm>

Recommended Citation

Branding, Mary (1990) "Becoming a Community of Writers: Life Book Writing," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 5: Iss. 3, Article 5.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1668>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

BECOMING A COMMUNITY OF WRITERS: LIFE BOOK WRITING

Mary Branding

The students came into the classroom, took their seats, and silently looked at their books. Some were recent high school graduates; others were returning to school after many years. They had driven to the Caro campus of Great Lakes Junior College from all over the area. They shared a common goal—to obtain skills needed for a decent job—and a common feeling—fear.

It was no surprise to me to have students come to this required composition class with apprehension. In the past, they had not had success with writing; their papers had often been returned to them covered with red. Comparing their writing to the literature they had to read, they felt inadequate. They either hated to write, or they believed they had nothing to write about. They certainly did not want to share what they had written; doing so made them feel vulnerable and threatened.

As their instructor for the next eleven weeks, I wanted the students to gain practice in a number of different modes of writing, ease in sharing those writings, and a sense of belonging, with their fellow class members, to a community of writers. This last goal seemed the most difficult; a community is a “unified body of individuals.” How could I turn this group of 33 apprehensive strangers into a community of writers?

I searched for a way to solve the problem, turning first to books about writing. Five books later, as I browsed through the essays in Toby Fulwiler’s *The Journal Book*, I read “Journal Writing as Person Making” by Fred Halberg. He said:

A large part of our self-concept consists of the narratives by means of which we remember and relate our past experiences....The irreproducibility and distinctness of each person’s life narrative constitutes a large part of our personal uniqueness. That is why telling our story

has the therapeutic effect of "ego strengthening." The very process leads the teller to become aware that he or she is a person with a unique history of triumph and tragedy, with as yet unfulfilled hopes and projects. (291)

I read this again and again. Because my students were such a variety of ages and had such a range of abilities, many of them needed "ego strengthening." Could narratives from their pasts be of use? As I pondered this, I remembered a book on my shelf: *How to Write Your Own Life Story*, by Lois Daniels. Called a "Step-by-step Guide for the Non-Professional Writer," this book showed people how to begin writing stories of their lives. I quickly reread it, sensing its potential to be adapted to my classroom. Modifying Daniels' list of 54 topics to a less overwhelming 25, I typed a topic index:

LIFE BOOK INDEX

1. Birth
2. Family
3. Family traditions/Vacations
4. First memories/Toys
5. School
6. Games/Sports
7. Holidays
8. Birthdays
9. Illness/Remedies
10. Jobs
11. Turning Points
12. Pets/Other animals
13. Courtship/Marriage
14. Children
15. Accomplishments/Talents
16. Special Moments
17. Gifts (given or received)
18. Persons who influenced you
19. Your life today
20. Your future plans
21. Natural disasters
22. Politics/Religions
23. Unforgettable people

24. Brushes with physical danger
25. Creativity

Then I made copies and had my students bring in looseleaf notebooks and lined paper. Using the index I gave them, they wrote each topic at the upper right-hand corner of a sheet of notebook paper, one to a page. These pages were memory banks used to store ideas (words or phrases) that could be written about later. We spent half an hour that first day jotting ideas on pages in our memory banks and sharing them, the sharing of ideas often triggering other ideas to jot down.

Thus began our adventure with our Life Books. I joined my students in this exercise, for I wanted not only to model writing but also to be part of this community of writers who wrote and shared. Picking one topic from our memory banks, we wrote for ten minutes as if we were writing a letter to close friends. We were to remember the journalistic questions (Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?) and answer them as we wrote. We were to write about feelings and opinions, being as honest as we could. We did not have to write about things painful or embarrassing.

We did our Life Book writing at the beginning of the two-hour class period, for this seemed a perfect way to forget jobs, families, and other classes and think of ideas and put them into words. It was, in fact, a good warm-up for the start of composition class. I allotted 20 minutes for this activity: ten for writing and ten for sharing. The rest of the class period was used for instruction, writing, peer group sharing, revising, and editing.

As we began to write our essays in different modes (narration, description, process, definition, comparison/contrast, and persuasion), students found they had a wealth of topics. One student's sketch of his sister turned into a longer, more detailed descriptive essay. Another's writing about her childhood led to a process paper on how to raise children. Another's remembrances became a persuasive essay about money not insuring happiness. Our ten-minute free-flow writing led to ideas students could use that were more universal in scope.

After our first ten-minute writing session, I led off by sharing my own writing: a fast sketch of my great-aunt Effie. An immense woman who sold corsets and drove a Model-T, she constantly forced dates and figs on us when we went to visit her. I always stuffed mine into the far recesses of her couch when she wasn't looking. The students laughed at my remembrance. I told

them that if my story—or any story they heard—triggered a memory for them, they should jot a word or phrase on the appropriate page in their memory bank and write about it later.

When I asked if others would like to share, hands went up. As students read or told their incidents, the rest of the class listened attentively, for we all enjoy a good story. The sharing of our stories was voluntary, but there was never a lack of volunteers. For time's sake, I limited the sharing to three students each class period. I noticed, however, that before class, during breaks, and later in the student lounge, students were gathering to share or discuss stories. Because these were bits and pieces of their lives and not final drafts of papers, students were comfortable sharing them; they had also found a common ground for conversation.

Daily we wrote; daily we shared. One girl had the rapt attention of the entire class as she read of her baby brother being burned when he pulled a pan of hot oil off the stove. As a four-year old, she had been sent across the farm field to neighbor's house to get help.

I ran, and I ran. As I ran, I could hear my brother screaming. I ran. I fell down. I finally got to the door and banged on it, screaming and crying. When the door opened, I blurted out what was happening. I stood there in the kitchen, shaking and crying, as she called the doctor.

She had not had time to finish writing her story, but the class wanted to know how it had ended. She blushed as she told them, for this was the first time she had spoken in class. One student remarked that her writing had power, and I asked why. Our writing was leading us to talk about writing and what was successful in writing. Students realized that this girl had put in enough detail that they felt as if they had been there sharing her experience.

I shared with them what Natalie Goldberg had said in *Writing Down the Bones*:

There's an old adage in writing: "Don't tell, but show." What does this actually mean? It means don't tell us about anger (or any of those big words like honesty, truth, hate, love, sorrow, life, justice, etc.); show us what made you angry. We will read it and feel angry. Don't

tell readers what to feel. Show them the situation, and that feeling will awaken in them (68).

That student hadn't told us she had been afraid; she had written of her experience, and we could feel the fear.

Daily we grew as a community of writers. The sharing that students did with their Life Books made it so much easier to come to their peer groups for feedback and suggestions on their essays. The students felt that they knew each other and could trust each other. As I joined one group, I heard a student tell another, "You're telling me; show me, instead." The group worked at suggesting ways the writer could do that. Students were becoming eager to read their papers and hear the suggestions from other students. They didn't feel this was a case of "the blind leading the blind"; they felt more like writers receiving suggestions from other writers about what worked and what did not.

My feeling was that the Life Book writing was serving its purpose well, but I wanted more feedback. I gave the students an evaluation form to fill out and return unsigned. Their responses were interesting; they had enjoyed this type of free-writing. They liked the sharing of writings because they had learned about other students; they were remembering incidents from their pasts; they realized how similar we all are (and how different); they felt approval from the class as they shared; they learned they did have things to write about. Some added signed comments:

Life, something we all know about, gives us good topics to write about without writer's block. It makes me aware of what a bottomless well the mind is. The constant practice trains the memory to click on automatically, followed by a smooth flow of words that only comes with practice.

Lisa O.

The Life Book writings have triggered an extra notion in the student to share his treasured writings with fellow students. Shared writings between students has helped them become more open with each other. There is carefree talking amongst each other.

Melissa W.

As people started to read about their lives in the past and present, the stories turned out to be funny ones, happy-ending ones, and even serious ones. It seemed to let us get to know each other

a little better. It took the first couple of weeks of getting used to the idea, and after hearing other's stories which seemed to trigger one's own old memories, the idea turned out to be a good project.

Marney C.

Only two students had negative comments about the Life Books. One said, "The past contains many hurts which cannot be put into words." The other said, "Anyone who is struggling to deal with a crisis will likely want to evade dissecting their history." These two students had written daily, however, and they had shared some of their writings.

The term ended, and I had time to reflect. As in other terms, the students had grown as writers by taking a variety of essays through the entire writing process. This term, however, they had also written and shared Life Book stories, an experience that had added an extra dimension to this particular class—the feeling of belonging to a community of writers where people share themselves as well as edit each other's writing. The thirty-three apprehensive strangers who had entered this classroom eleven weeks earlier had quickly become a "unified body of individuals" – a community of writers. Because they had written in their Life Books and shared that writing, they had gained self-confidence as writers. They no longer felt threatened by writing—or by sharing. Their success has encouraged me to keep the Life Book writing project as an integral part of my composition classes.

Works Cited

- Daniels, Lois. *How to Write Your Own Life Story*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1985.
- Goldberg, Natalie. *Writing Down the Bones*. Boston : Shambhala, 1986.
- Halberg, Fred. "Journal Writing as Person Making." *The Journal Book*. Ed. Toby Fulwiler. New Hampshire: Heinemann Educational Books, Inc., 1987.

Mary Branding is composition teacher at Great Lakes Junior College, Caro campus.