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Identity in Literacy Narratives: Toward Reflexive Pedagogy in First Year Writing

Laiken Elizabeth Harrigan

IDENTITY IN LITERACY NARRATIVES: TOWARD REFLEXIVE PEDAGOGY IN FIRST YEAR WRITING

by

Laiken Elizabeth Harrigan

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Accepted by:

Hannah Rule, Director of Thesis

Kevin Brock, Reader

Cheryl L. Addy, Interim Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

ABSTRACT

An ongoing discussion for composition pedagogues is the relation of individuals' identities and discourse histories in relation to academic discourses. In this thesis, I argue that academic discourse cannot be entirely separated from personal discourse, as individuals are always in conversation with their discoursal histories and identities. In order to better understand how students perceive their relationships to academic discourse, I analyze how First Year Writing (FYW) students experience the discourse of FYW— where they either intertwine their identities or we see their personal identities collide with the academic space. I used open coding to conduct a textual analysis of a set of 19 literacy narratives from an English 101 course I taught in the Fall semester of 2022. I expected students to reflect on their experiences in a wide variety of ways, but instead I found that students adopted one specific narrative archetype, constructing themselves as conquerors triumphing over the hardship of joining a new discourse by learning to embrace the genre norms of the group. Using these findings alongside my analysis of the literacy narrative prompt, I propose ways FYW instructors might alter the literacy narrative assignment to privilege exploration of students' social, cultural, and linguistic identities over their written product.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: STUDENT IDENTITIES IN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

As a field, composition pedagogues have come to better recognize and value students as complex individuals with capacious identities—with the social turn in the 1980's (away from the cognitive revolution which privileged logic and intellectualism) toward issues of social injustice, community, and politics (Gee 1296), academics began to prioritize the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which students wrote. Along with that shift we have grown to understand writing as a dialectical process of self-actualization, learning, and expression. This shift in how composition scholars viewed writing and identity was seen in personal writing, especially in reflective or "writing to learn" genres like freewriting (see Peter Elbow, Anne Bertoff, William Irmscher). However, this same view of writing does not yet seem to be fully realized within university discourse, or what we might call the academic writing scene (in more formal genres like the academic essay). This is something we have been wrestling with since the modern field's inception, and the question about how we treat students with multiple and complex identities and discourses in the classroom still remains. In this thesis, I argue that we ought to teach our students, specifically first year students in composition, to integrate rather than replace their discoursal histories within university

discourse. Throughout this essay, I will first think about the history of how identity has been treated in the field, and then offer an analysis of my own classroom using a set of my students' literacy narratives in order to propose strategies for building a more reflexive pedagogy (one that allows students to think deeper about their own identities in discourse) in the English 101 course at the University of South Carolina.

A foundational scholar of composition pedagogy and expressivist, Peter Elbow was one of the first to reimagine the goals of academic discourse, as he saw its practices at the time as impractical and even harmful for many first-year college students. He characterizes the issue in his 1991 article "Reflections on Academic Discourse: How It Relates to Freshmen and Colleagues," where he notes that academic discourse was prioritized over other discourses, despite the fact that many college students would never write using these norms after they graduate (136). Prior to this, Elbow advocated for more personal writing and thinking in the classroom—particularly in his book *Writing Without Teachers* which opposes traditionalist pedagogy in favor for teaching which encouraged students to write in their own voice through freewriting exercises. He addresses the issue of academic discourse within the context of FYW, begging the question that pedagogues still grapple with today: do we do our students a disservice if we only teach within the language norms of academic discourse? ("Reflections" 236). While he notes that it is the duty of FYW instructors to prepare students to write within the academy as to not "reward privileged students" (135) who are already familiar with the kind of language used, he makes several claims about the benefit of teaching non-academic discourse in addition to formal scholarly discourse. Here we see stages of the

academic discourse debate begin to arise, particularly against David Bartholomae's notes on the matter of language use just a few years prior.

In one of his most prominent works, "Inventing the University," David Bartholomae situates the FYW student within the scene of academic discourses, describing common mistakes that these "basic writers" (that is presumably to mean young student writers) make, and while he acknowledges that not all students will have the same writing skills and expertise, he argues that all basic writers must "learn that what they said (the code) was more important than what they meant (their intention) (622). Student are asked to "invent the university" through these language choices, as they have to make compromises between various discourses to occupy disciplinary roles. Unlike Elbow, Bartholomae believes that a student's ability to recognize the norms of a discourse and to shift—that is to recognize when and how to use different linguistic, social and cultural norms—is what gives a student their voice. Bartholomae is interested in the kinds of power that can be seized through language, and his hope is for students to gain the power and privilege that comes along with being an "expert" code-switcher. Speaking of this power and privilege, he says:

> Writers who can successfully manipulate an audience (or, to use a less pointed language, writers who can accommodate their motives to their readers' expectations) are writers who can both imagine and write from a position of privilege. They must, that is, see themselves within privileged discourse, one that already includes and excludes groups of readers. They must be either equal to or more powerful than those they would address (10).

Given that Bartholomae sees successful writing as enacting power within a privileged discourse—or to feign the knowledge of an insider in the discourse to sound credible—he is less interested in who the writer is and their personal writing experiences, rather he cares that the writer can sound like an expert in their field. He claims that students must use a voice that is not their own, and to use the "common wisdom" of a community to their advantage in order to be successful. In contrast, Elbow seeks to grapple with the issue he finds with Bartholomae's approval of distancing the self from one's writing:

> But the very appeal of academic discourse as I have just described it tends to rest on the assumption that we can separate the ideas and reasons and arguments from the person who holds them; that there are such things as unheld opinions—assertions that exist uninfluenced by who says them and who hears them—positions not influenced by one's feelings, class, race, gender, sexual orientation, historical position, et.—thinking that "stands on its own two feet." In the end, behind this conception of academic discourse in general is a bias toward objectivity or foundationalism (243)

Here Elbow describes a principle that is more commonly held now, which is that those involved in academic discourse are subjects influenced by the outside world, and they cannot orient themselves as objects within a field unencumbered by the influences around them. Rather individuals or first-year students in the university become positioned by both the academic and non-academic discourses that surround them. Moreover, there has been a shift away from viewing language in such a dualistic manner, where scholars now mostly consider the boundaries between academic and non-academic discourse to be much more complicated and blurred, as subjectivity, identity, and situatedness become

more pronounced within this discussion (Jacqueline Royster, Staci Perryman-Clark, Donna Qualley, and Robert Yagelski).

A foundational moment in the field—one which precedes the Bartholomae and Elbow, academic versus personal discourse debate and which blurred the lines between academic and personal discourses, and one which is still widely considered today—comes from the Conference on College Composition and Communication's statement on Students' Right to Their Own Language published in 1975. This document affirms that students should be able to use their own dialects and idiolects within the classroom. The question that they raised is, "shall we place our emphasis on what the vocal elements of the public think it wants or on what the actual available linguistic evidence indicates we should emphasize?" (709). This question not only sets up the Bartholomae and Elbow debate, where they implicitly negotiate the answer to this question, but it also is still widely thought about today. Staci Perryman-Clark responds to this question in 2013, noting that while STROL is a framework primarily geared toward helping students of color, it tends to concentrate on people of color, even if they do not speak Ebonics (471), or what we would likely refer to now as Black English or African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Referencing this text seems necessary for situating the conversation on identity in academic discourse as students of color have historically been the most impacted by the choices made about language norms enforced in the classroom. It is important to be cognizant of the kind of harm that can be done to students' identity by not appropriately treating linguistic preferences in the classroom. Students of color may be penalized for employing cultural dialects in the classroom, or that the instructor may assume the kinds of language they may choose to use based on their color. Giving

students access to power through code-switching, as Bartholomae suggests, may perhaps be useful, but students should not only have the right to choose their own language both in personal and academic discourse, but they are intrinsically tied to the language that they use in a variety of discourses, and it is not necessarily a "choice" for them, which complicates the lines between the two even further. I'm interested in how the Elbow, Bartholomae, and Perryman-Clark discussion obscures the lines between academic and personal discourse, and I'm interested in understanding further how students experience identity in the classroom—how do my students deal with the murkiness of their discourse experiences?

Ultimately, my own experience as an instructor of FYW and these principal discussions on identity in discourse have led me to consider several questions which prompt my own research. The first, based on the notion that personal and academic discourses are experienced complexly, is what are my students' relationships between their multiple and intertwined discourses and identities? How do they encounter FYW based on these relationships? I will explore the answers to these questions through an analysis of my students' work, which I anticipate will help me to respond to the following: How can composition instructors help students perceive their full identities within the classroom? In this thesis, I first come to terms with what others in the field have said about identity and discourse, particularly in relation to literacy narratives, before coding literacy narratives taken from my own class to understand how my students see themselves in FYW and how instructors may transform the assignment to help students better understand their discoursal experiences and language history.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW: ENGAGED PEDAGOGY, BEING, AND REFLEXIVITY

In recent scholarship, there has been a shift in the lens through which writing is understood and experienced in composition—building on the Elbow vs. Bartholomae debate about whether personal or academic discourse should be used in the classroom by thinking about how writing can be thought of as a way of thinking and being, and it is therefore more challenging to label the kinds of writing we do. There are several scholars whose work inspires my thinking about the FYW curriculum, more specifically the literacy narrative assignment which I detail later. Through the work of bell hooks, Jacqueline Jones Royster, Robert Yagelski, and Donna Qualley, I am able to envision the kinds of changes to the literacy narrative assignment that could help students think more meaningfully about their identities and discourses. There are several terms these scholars use that influenced how I taught the literacy narrative: engaged pedagogy, writing as being, and reflexivity. In hooks conceptualization of an engaged pedagogy, she addresses how teachers should focus on their own self-actualization in the classroom to promote the norms they want to see—integrating their identity into their teaching in order to help students become more themselves in the classroom. This helps me to think more about how the teachers' behavior in the classroom can influence students' perception of how they ought to treat their own identity, which I will discuss later when analyzing how students described their teachers, and how that impacted their view of themselves within academic discourse.

Just as hooks sees the connection between personal and academic identities, Royster adds that historically academic discourse has been thought of as superior to personal language, and this view is both harmful and flawed. She identifies several conclusions about academic discourse that help us to address the fallacies of this view, and the kinds of work that needs to be done in order to reshape our perception of language norms in academic discourse. It is important to recognize these fallacies for my own research, as I seek to undo the harm done by the tacit hierarchical norms that Royster identifies. Yagelski posits a solution that I find particularly useful regarding the concerns that hooks and Royster raise: he repositions writing as "being," not just a final product but an experience, and he thinks through the ways in which we ought to treat writing more authentically as a way of "truth-seeking" honoring the students' experience over their final products. Thinking of writing as "being" and "truth-seeking" are prominent themes in the changes that I will later propose to the literacy narrative, as I attempt to make more space for self-reflection and the experience of writing. Finally, similar to writing as "being," Qualley posits a reflexive teaching method that offers similar solutions, where the student must come to understand the "other" that they are always inherently in conversation with when they write. While it seems challenging to ask our students to consider that "other" they are writing to, Qualley offers some strategies for reflexive thinking that I consider.

Not only is the student's identity a primary concern for my research, but also how instructors treat their own identity in the classroom, as they set the precedent for the way students may express themselves in the classroom. For example, if the instructor strictly

uses academic genres and language norms and does not share any personal information about their own lives, students may feel that they must abandon their own identities and language practices in order to be successful in the classroom. hooks thinks about this pervasive identity crisis as a "dis-ease" in that there is a felt sense amongst instructors who struggle to take into consideration the complexities of a students' life and work. In other words, instructors can feel uneasy "when students want us to see them as whole human beings with complex lives and experiences rather than simply as seekers after compartmentalized bits of knowledge" (15). hooks sees this as an issue that stems from how educators themselves deal with their own identity in the classroom—often, according to hooks, they are expected to leave their own identity and struggles at the door so as to not "interfere with the teaching process" (17). As an educator, I wonder whether or not we have really made much progress to address this issue since this article was published in the early 90's. In some ways I look at my own college experience and I encountered several professors who seemed honest about their own well-being, and who opened up space to discuss identity and mental well-being in the classroom. With that being said, as an instructor when I run into personal struggles that may impact my performance in the classroom, I find myself dropping those bits of me at the door and walking in with a consistent performative attitude without even consciously recognizing it. That is not to say I don't try to share certain things about my own life with students so that they may see me as a person, but I certainly feel the pressure to disconnect from part of myself in order to "perform" well in the classroom. hooks notes this "dualistic separation of public and private" where there is "no connection between life practices, habits of being, and the roles of professors" (16). While she uses a couple of more

extreme examples of "private" life issues, such as instructors who might be addicts or abusers, she uses these examples to highlight the fact that academic institutions are primarily concerned with the work the instructor does in the classroom over their private woes. This of course does not include the elements of the instructor's identity that cannot be left at the door, such as their race, age, or gender.

I want to consider the implications of hooks' discussion of this disconnect between public and private discourses and identities for both teachers and students. As hooks notes at this crucial turning point in the 90's, students were craving a more authentic relationship with teachers where the teacher might at the very least acknowledge the "wounded psyche" of the student—that is not to say that the teacher should be expected to take on the role of a therapist, rather students "want an education that is healing to the uninformed, unknowing spirit" (19). This revelation is especially poignant today in our post-COVID times where the mental health crisis seems to reach new heights every day. I have seen in my students the desire for learning that is authentic and meaningful, which seems to me to be an education that recognizes porous boundaries between personal and academic discourses and identities—one that "addresses the connection between what they are learning and their overall life experiences" (hooks 9). This kind of dynamic must begin with the teacher who models the expectations and norms of the classroom.

hooks notes that "teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students" (15). In other words, we must address the stigma around our personal lives interfering with our teaching, in that the sole role of the teacher is not just

to walk into the classroom, lecture, and leave, rather the teacher might engage with the curriculum through the lens of their own experiences. That is not to say that the instructor should be telling their students all of their problems, rather there is much to be said for bringing in life experiences and one's positionalities in the world in that it both helps instructors relate to their students and can make the curriculum come to life in a way that feels relevant for students. We should model the lens we would like our students to use, particularly when it comes to FYW curriculum. hooks considers how "engaged pedagogy" allows students freedom to engage with their work in ways that are meaningful for them, where their thoughts and experiences are valued. Though she again notes that this type of pedagogy requires the teacher to participate:

> When education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess. Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks. (21)

While it may be difficult for instructors to participate in the kind of pedagogy that asks them to commit their own ways of being into the classroom, the reward that hooks seeks seems worth taking the risk. Engaged pedagogy is a crucial part of the kinds of reflexive pedagogy I consider later, as it seeks to bring the student and their experiences to the forefront of the class, valuing them as writers writing over their finished products. While hooks may not have used this terminology in particular, I can see where her work may

have built the foundation for later scholars like Royster, Qualley, and Yagelski to come to terms with the way students and their writing are valued in composition.

Similar to hooks' notion of the importance of personal experience being registered in the classroom, almost a decade later Royster took this idea a step further in thinking about the conflict between academic and nonacademic discourses (23), and implications of seeing these discourses as in opposition to each other on the practice of academic writing. Royster first establishes that the field at the time was trying to better understand the "consequences of literacy" on areas beyond academia in a student's life, and the variety of "values and expectations" among different disciplines (23-24). However, she critiques the usage of the terms such as "academic language and academic discourse" given the narrowed and "untextured" context in which pedagogues use them (24). The main concern here resonates with bell hooks' piece, where there is an "otherness" ascribed to non-academic discourses. There is an obvious bias toward academic language as being superior to the language preferences of students outside of the classroom:

> We distill the variations that we otherwise specify and use general terms in ways that suggest sameness, tacit understanding, and static, non-contentious representations, not just of language or discourse but also of *goodness*. Despite our occasional intent to suggest otherwise, such habits of distillation have engendered in our field hierarchies of power, privilege, and value, and they have continually reified notions insider/outsider, center/margin, us/other, and also notions of good/suspect (24).

If academics come to a static conclusion about what language should look like, students will knowingly be asked to ignore their experiences in other discourse communities, and therefore their primary intention for writing in the classroom must be about learning how to perform in order to appease an audience. The student becomes stripped of their authentic linguistic experiences that happen outside of the classroom, and they may begin to think of writing as a specific means to an end, rather than a genuine reflective learning experience. I would also like to point out that the "othering" Royster considers may have serious consequences for some students' psyches, as they are likely to internalize the notion that their selves—their cultural, national, racial, linguistic, and ethic identities—don't belong, and that the only way for them to fit into this hierarchy is to adopt the norms laid out by the academy.

Royster comes to several promising conclusions about the nature of academic discourse that are important to address in order to reshape the genre norms used within academia. First, she notes that academic discourse is a human invention. The term was not coined because of a "natural phenomenon" rather the term was created to implement specific social, cultural and linguistic norms and practices. Second, Royster does not see academic discourse as a singular formation, but a multiplicity of discourses, reflective of academic disciplines and ways of knowing. Finally, academic discourse should not be considered "apart, above, or beyond the varieties of discourse around them" (25). In other words, personal and academic discourses will invariably speak to each other and should therefore not be examined dualistically, as those involved in academic discourse are "constituents on a variable and real sociocultural terrain" and the "knowledge-making process" does not solely occur in academic situations (26). Here, Royster places the

student and teacher as "subjects" within a classroom as opposed to as simply "objects" restricted and imposed upon by the values dictated to them – as subjects, they are involved in the meaning-making process and are constantly negotiating the "rules" and practices that happen within this space. Where Royster notes that the process of knowledge is "ongoing, rather than a static enterprise" (27), this principle can be applicable to both teachers and students (subjects) in the classroom, where learning should indeed be "dynamic" or "multidirectional," a in conversation with the social, cultural, and linguistic experiences that subjects bring with them into the classroom.

More recently, Yagelski contributes to this notion of writing as multi-faceted by repositioning writing as "being." More specifically, he says:

> …when writing is practiced as an act of being, it opens up possibilities for individual and collective change that are undermined by conventional writing instruction, which is often characterized by an obsession with textual form and adherence to convention. A truly transformative pedagogy of writing, therefore, begins with an understanding of the act of writing not as the writer thinking (as in a cognitive view) or communicating (as in a social view) or constructing himself or herself (as in a poststructuralist view)—all of which are valid but limited ways of understanding writing—but as the writer being (8).

I'm interested in Yagelski's ontological consideration of writing which not only encapsulates the commonly held assumptions about writing (that it is an act of thinking, socialization, and identity construction), but opens this limited circle to thinking about the act of writing as "being in the world" (7). He notes the moment when he began to consider the experience of writing as valuable as the text written, where he now sees

"writing in the moment" as a transformative experience. In his work, he proposes what a pedagogy might look like which honors writing as being, one of the foundational principles of this pedagogy being "truth-seeking." Where writing is often taught as an ends to a mean in a "dualistic" world, writing as a way of truth-seeking opens up the possibility for establishing a new goal of academic discourse, where imagination, creativity, individuality, and well-being are valued over consumerism and collectivity (8). This is no small task, though if harnessed correctly, this pedagogy wields a transformative power in our students' hands, one that would allow them to "transform themselves and the world" (8). This kind of transformative power seems to come from shifting the emphasis from the "writer's writing" to the "writer writing" (9) in order to think about the power of the experience of writing as opposed to simply the work that is created—in other words we might not only consider what the writer created, but how they were transformed by the process of writing: truth-seeking and genuine exploration. Where Royster complicates our idea of what constitutes academic discourse, Yagelski gives us a means for immersing ones' past discourses and identity into the classroom—by relabeling writing as being, we can give power back to our students to make writing their own, and to learn about their selves. When we simply focus on the written product, students will more than likely write with that in mind, but if we ask them to engage with the experience of writing, I believe they are more likely to write for themselves in order to learn and to reflect on their own being.

Though written 10 years prior, Qualley explores the notion of reflexive pedagogy in her book *Turns of Thought: Teaching Composition as Reflexive Inquiry*, which reminds me much of Yagelski's notion of writing as being. In chapter 5, Qualley

observes an "othering" that happens in writing, where the writer experiences a "dialectical encounter with an other" (138). The "other" points toward the inner-consciousness that stems from our "turn to the self, and the continual interplay between self and other…" (139). This interplay engages the writer in both an exploratory and self-directed manner, where they enact a sense of agency and self-scrutiny in order to gain full autonomy over their writing. This notion of the other is similar to Yagelski's idea of writing as being, as the student in both cases becomes grounded in the unspoken experiences and situations happening around them and in them that impact their work. To experience writing more thoughtfully, focused on the exploration that happens there and not the product, is very much in line with Qualley's goal of inner-consciousness and self-exploratory writing. I think the idea of self-exploratory writing plays a critical role in the way students identify themselves within academic discourse, particular in the composition classroom, where the student must earn authority over their work through a process of self-realization, as opposed to the illusion of mastery gained when students assume authority over their work based on their ability to cohere to conventional norms—real autonomy and discovery seems to happen based on the "other," and it leads to the question that I think we all ask ourselves as writing instructors: who are our students writing for? Are our students listening to the call of their own being, of the "other" that is always speaking to them, or do they ignore those voices, those urges to explore, in order to satisfy a convention or requirement?

The work I have overviewed and attempted to connect in this section leads me to several conclusions that will both situate and support my research. First, the barrier between public and academic identities is much more complicated than I believed. Both

hooks and Royster break down this barrier, and they substantiate a new "engaged" pedagogy that ought to be realized in FYW classrooms, though I feel most new instructors still operate under the traditional way of seeing, where they draw a stark line between the kinds of language and experiences that happen outside vs. inside academic discourse. Second, there is a need to reshape traditional ways of viewing language and identity in the classroom; it is harmful for the way students see themselves and their writing—as they will likely see their own identities and language use as inferior to the standard that has been set by academics, and therefore see their way of being in the world as lesser. Finally, the solution that I begin to see to these concerns can be found in Yagelski's view of writing as "being," where we prioritize the writer's experience over their written product. With these texts in mind, I want to consider how students in my FYW course are invited to conceptualize their identities as selves and writers. Specifically, I engage with the literacy narrative—an assignment that asks students to consider their identities as literate subjects acquiring a new discourse—in order to see how students think about themselves as both selves and writers. Such insights can illuminate how my students' subjectivities encounter the discourse of the English 101 classroom and help us to think about how to alter our pedagogies to better encourage students to integrate their discoursal histories into the classroom. In chapter 3, I will contextualize the literacy narrative used at UofSC in relation to similar literacy narrative assignments used at other institutions.

CHAPTER 3

PROMPTING THE LITERACY NARRATIVE

In this section, I first define what the literacy narrative assignment is, both on a wider scale and at my institution specifically. I will contextualize existing literacy narrative research before analyzing the prompt used for the FYW course at the University of South Carolina this past year (2022). In this analysis, I will describe some of the moves the prompt makes, what they might signal to the students; then, I will address the concerns that this prompt raises for me, particularly based on Perryman-Clark's notes on code-switching.

The Literacy Narrative as a genre is not defined by a particular prompt, though from what I have gathered, all literacy narratives deal with questions about identity and language and/or discourse. Instructors can use these concepts to help students raise questions about their own language, writing, and literacy experiences in and out of the classroom. In his article "Heroes, Rebels, and Victims: Student Identities in Literacy Narratives," Bronwyn T. Williams defines the literacy narrative as an assignment "where students are asked to tell about and reflect upon their experiences with reading and writing" (342). Depending on the course objectives and the instructor, literacy narratives take on a wide variety of different forms, and Williams notes that literacy narratives can be used to "…uncover cultural constructions of literacy, illustrate student passages

between language worlds and raise questions about the politics of acquisition. Other teachers have used them [literacy narratives] to foster multicultural understanding, to complicate students' definitions of literacy…" (342). Williams finds that most importantly the literacy narrative gives him a sense of students' disposition toward reading and writing based on prior experiences.

This assignment is also critical for instructors to gain a sense of what students believe about reading and writing and where they may be resistance to certain pedagogies based on their prior experiences (Williams 342), especially in how they have come to understand literacy in their secondary ELA classes. Williams notes that because students tend to use a narrative structure for this assignment, they tend to construct identities which can indicate a lot about the ways in which literacy has impacted them and how they see themselves as writers.

Looking at other literacy narrative assignments made public by different universities, I noticed there is a wide range in how the prompt is set up. Ohio State University, one of the co-sponsors of the Digital Archives of Literacy Narratives, uses the literacy narrative for a course titled: Language, Identity & Culture in the U.S. Experience. According to their online archive, they ask students to write a five to seven page essay discussing their "path to literacy" or to "discuss a significant moment/memory" about their literacy experiences. Similarly, The City University of New York explains to students that the literacy narrative is a "personalized story of your relationship with language" and that they ought to reflect on "trials and triumphs" in their literacy journey. In an online presentation from The University of Georgia, they suggest that instructors give students multimodal options for the Literacy Narrative, such as a podcast or letter,

while emphasizing the narrative element of the assignment. Meanwhile, Arizona State University asks students to write a one-thousand to fifteen-hundred word essay which focuses on a rhetorical moment in their life which helped them to learn something as a reader or writer. These examples may share some common ground, but overall, their objectives look very different. OSU and CUNY both emphasize the narrative element of the assignment, though OSU offers more broad directions (CUNY outlines a specific narrative structure students should use including hook, thesis, etc.) UG, however, suggests that teachers use an even broader, multi-modal approach—though they want students to focus on the assignment as a narrative, no matter the mode. It seems like these universities do not offer as much direction in terms of what elements of literacy they want students to focus on, where Arizona state makes it clear that the objective is to consider rhetoric. Overall, based on the literacy narratives that I could gather from online sources, it seems that each university takes a unique perspective on the objectives of the assignment.

The prompt for the literacy narrative used in the FYW program at the University of South Carolina (USC) emphases genre, language, identity, and discourse communities. Students are asked to write in the form of a personal narrative, describing a time when they entered a new discourse community and how they used/learned genre(s) to engage with this community. In comparison to the other universities, USC uses a more focused lens for the prompt—using words like genre and discourse to make it clear to students that the objective of the assignment should not just be about literacy or a literacy memory, but about entering into a new discourse. Similar to ASU, USC wants students to consider the assignment rhetorically, though the prompt doesn't explicitly use the word

"rhetoric," by analyzing a discourse and genre, there is some rhetorical thinking. Also, though USC does not use the term "trial and triumph" like CUNY, the way the prompt is framed seems to cue students to do this as it asks a student to think about what they had to learn in order to join a new discourse community.

It is interesting that in this prompt there is a plain distinction drawn between personal and the academic discourse. The assignment reads, "For your topic, remember that literacy learning often takes place outside of school. Brainstorm other areas of life where you learned to communicate in new ways." I'm interested in this moment, thinking back to Elbow/Bartholomae, because I wonder in what ways it may or may not influence our students understanding of the way discourses interact with each other. This is not necessarily a critique, rather this moment seems to carry a lot of underlying weight when I think about the ways in which students often isolate their personal writing experiences from the writing they do in school—might this reinforce what they already (likely) believe about writing? While the answer to that is not clear, it's worth pausing on, as I will soon evaluate through a reading of 19 literacy analyses, the ways in which students see themselves as writers, and the connections they make between personal and academic discourses (if at all).

For their narratives, students at USC are asked to write 1,000-1,500 words in MLA format, and they are "encouraged to use first-person pronouns and to practice language awareness by mixing varieties of English." The length of this literacy narrative appears to be standard when compared with how other institutions implement this assignment. Encouraging students to use "varieties of English" is also a small instruction that carries some weight, as students are inadvertently asked to reflect on the kinds of

language they use in a variety of discourses. To use Perryman-Clark's terminology, students would be asked to "code switch" or to at least think explicitly about the kinds of code switching they do in order to implement a variety English. I also wonder if this may be a bit too limiting for English as a Second Language students or students who speak another language in addition to English, particularly at home. In one of my students' literacy narratives, for example, she described her experience learning Spanish when she travelled home to see her extended family and compared this to what she referred as the "broken Spanish" used in her own home in America. I think the same principles would apply to this scenario, where the student must "code-switch" to navigate through a variety of discourse situations. At the same time, I wonder if this method for evaluating code-switching might extend the dichotomy between academic and personal discourses even further in a student's mind. Moreover, I wonder what it would look like if the instruction to mix a variety of English was described a bit more in depth or if students were asked to reflect more explicitly on this notion. It is my concern that this instruction may have been lost on most students, and I think the sentiment behind it is worthy of asking students to explore further. It may even be worth asking students to reflect in a separate document on the kinds of language they used in the discourse they described in comparison to academic discourse in order to get them to reflect on different language experiences, and to perhaps even reflect on how their identities and outside language experiences are brought with them into the classroom.

Overall, the literacy narrative assignment as I have understood and taught it at USC is a space where students can explore their relationship with language and writing within a particular discourse using a personal perspective; however, the prompt

distinguishes between personal and academic discourse. It seems to me drawing a contrast between these discourses might reinforce prior negative feelings students may have toward academic discourse, without giving them an authentic space to explore those feelings. Analyzing students' responses in the next section will allow me to better explore and address these concerns.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYZING THE LITERACY NARRATIVE

In order to better understand students' relationships to a variety of discourses and themselves, I decided to collect, code, and analyze one set of literacy narratives from a Fall 2022 English 101 course in an IRB-approved teacher-research study. As I approached the analysis of the set, my central question was: how do student subjectivities encounter the discourse of the university? In other words, I wanted to better understand how students' identities and language norms would interact with the academic discourses of FYW—more specifically, I was curious how our prompt may perpetuate or change what students believe about the kinds of language used in academic discourse. To investigate this question, I first used open coding in my students' literacy narratives to identify specific patterns in the language they use, particularly the language they use from the prompt, and the language they use to describe themselves. I was curious about how students might engage with specific words used in the prompt which describe the project of the literacy narrative, including words like "discourse," "literacy," "language," and "community." I specifically wanted to find out if students reiterated vocabulary from the prompt, and if so, how they implemented the language—did they use these words in appropriate or fitting contexts Did these words fit the tone of their narratives? What did the use of these words reveal about the way they see themselves within particular discourses—and what kind of discourses? After I coded the number of times these words

were used in individual student narratives and in total in the whole set, I looked at the different contexts these words were used within, and I describe these patterns (see Table 4.1 below). Then, after a first read, I went through each narrative individually to highlight reoccurring words that students used to describe themselves. I coded these words and recorded the top seven descriptors in table 4.2. What I found was that specific narrative structures along with these words, very similar to Williams' findings, a pattern I will discuss below. I then analyzed how the descriptors used revealed the kinds of narrative structures students created, and ultimately what this revealed something about how students see themselves as literate subjects both in academic and personal discourses. Finally, in Table 4.3, I record the most frequently used words students used to describe the new discourse communities they joined. This also helped me to gauge the kinds of narratives students began to tell, and how they described the kinds of communities they saw themselves within. This data also in a few cases accompanied how students saw their teachers, which I analyzed in order to think further about how students craft identities for themselves and their teachers in their narratives.

Table 4.1 Words Used in Students' Literacy Narratives from the Assignment Prompt

Word	**Number of Times Used**
Learn(ed/ing)	88
Community	78
Language	18
Discourse	13
Literacy	7
Genre	0

As shown in Table 4.1, “community” was by far the most recurring term from the prompt that writers included. I was not entirely surprised to find that “learn,” and “community” were the most commonly used words, whereas “discourse,” and “literacy” were much less used, given that the first two words would likely feel much more familiar and relatable to students. However, “genre” was not used a single time throughout any of the literacy narratives. I wonder if the discrepancy between the words “literacy/genre” and “learn/community” stems from how students understand these words, or how they associate them, or both. What I mean is that it seemed through our introductory lessons that students were much less familiar with what literacy and genre actually meant. When I asked initial questions about these words, most students understood the basic concepts, that literacy means the ability to read and write, and genre describes different textual forms. After spending time reading texts from the *Carolina Reader,* the shared textbook designed for this course, that outlined more in depth what literacy and genre mean prior to writing the literacy narrative, I assumed that students would be much more in tune with these words, able to apply them to their own lives. Given that our definitions for literacy and genre are much more expansive than what students very likely learned in high school or elsewhere, students may have felt confused by these new definitions. Were they simply too confused to apply these words to their texts given these new definitions—or do students attribute words like literacy and genre to academia, and find them to be inaccessible in personal discourse settings?

Not only did students not engage the concept of “genre,” but many of them fell short of discussing the kinds of genre norms they had to learn in order to fit in with a new discourse community. Many students instead focused on their personal doubts and

triumphs, which makes sense given the prompt asks them to discuss joining a new discourse community. The students describe their challenges in joining a new discourse, and later I describe how these narrative archetypes emerge. It seems clear to me, since students scored lower on this aspect of the essay, that there was a struggle for students to apply their learning about genre to this assignment because they did not fully understand what genre norms entail. Secondly, the terms literacy and genre might not have been as frequently used or discussed in student literacy narratives because students attribute these words as being "academic." Where "community" and "language" are terms that students would very likely use in a variety of contexts outside of academia, the term "genre" could be associated with English classroom language. I noticed that the term "literacy" (and this is also somewhat true for the term "discourse") was much more likely to be used in essays where students described an academic discourse setting. For example, one student wrote about his experience transferring from a public high school to a private Christian academy. In his essay, he used the term "discourse" to describe the Bible class he took, where he felt othered by the "language" they used, and he described his experience growing to fit in with the discourse community as "learning" a new "literacy." It's interesting to me that he used these particular words to describe the experience of joining this classroom, and while he did seem to discuss a variety of genre norms when discussing the school at large, such as uniform and appropriate language, when he discussed the classroom more specifically is when he used the terms from the prompt. He also says in one moment, "I enjoyed the class however I was lost in their dialect." In another moment he writes, "I also gained experience in knowledge in the new discourse community of a Christian school. I had begun to understand their concepts and language." The language he uses in these examples is quite

formal and adheres to the language of the prompt, and it seems to me that this student is associating academic discourse as a whole, both in his past experience and in the 102 classroom, as formal and particular. He does not offer any kind of anecdote of a conversation held in class, or even any specific scenarios where he describes the kind of language used. Rather while his analysis was clear, cohesive, and followed the instructions of the prompt, it lacked some of the meaningful insight that others had found. This could also be due to the fact that the student is unfamiliar with the narrative genre, and he does not understand how anecdotal evidence may help him to illustrate a point. Rather, he writes from a more generalized perspective. In either case, it does not seem like writing the literacy narrative was an especially meaningful writing experience for this student, instead it seems like he was writing toward a particular end—to achieve the goals of the prompt for me, the teacher. That is not to say there weren't moments of insight within his work, but it did not feel like he was able to meditate on those moments, especially when he described being an outsider, where it seems like he left out genuine details in exchange for what he perceived as academic writing. This student's use of the terms from the prompt, and his formal tone, leads me to believe that students view this assignment as within the confines of academic discourse, where their priority is to meet a particular end as opposed to truly thinking about the complexities of their own language experiences—they are writing to create a product over writing to learn.

In the following table, I collect the most common words students used to describe themselves in relation to literacy and the discourse community they each wrote about. What I found is that students often described themselves in relation to the expectations of a particular discourse, and they valued their successfulness in the discourse. Though success

did not always mean the same thing to each student, it was often ascribed to their status change from "outsider" to "insider" of their particular discourse.

Table 4.2 Words Students Used to Describe Themselves

Word	Number of Times Used
Win/Excel/Advance	16
Confused	11
Success/Achieve	9
Confident	7
Shy	6
Anxious	3
Embarrassed	3

Table 4.3 Words Students Used Concerning Discourse Communities

Word	Number of Times Used
Hard/Difficult/Challenging	42
Goal	15
Easy/Easier	13
Grade	11
Scary/Scared	9

As shown in Table 4.2 and Table 4.3 above, students thought about themselves in proportion to success, advancement, and the challenges with which they were faced. All 19 students described some form of difficulty they faced, thinking about joining a discourse community as not only laborious, but taxing on their sense of identity and overall well-being in a majority of instances. This resonates with some findings that Williams mentions about student identities in literacy narratives, and he outlines a couple studies in which students constructing literacy narratives painted themselves as "heroes," "rebels," and even "victims" of their own stories. Williams notes that these students thought of themselves as heroic in the sense that they had to overcome adversity in order to become a successful writer, through the means of rebelling against a hierarchy (343).

He also notes that these studies found that students first thought of themselves as "victims" of their oppressors, who were often their teachers, before rising to overcome the "bad or insensitive" teacher that disrupted their perception of literacy and writing (344). In other words, in his study Williams found that students felt empowered as writers when they learned to flaunt the conventional norms of "mainstream education." Williams' observation of his students as victims/heroes is consistent with my own findings; however, his characterization of his students as rebels does not match my own data. Where it seems Williams sought to identify the kinds of narrative structures that students identified with, I initially looked for patterns in the kinds of language my students used to describe themselves. Williams also did not (to my knowledge) differentiate his students by race, gender, age, etc., rather he spoke about his students generally. Given the nature of my own teacher-research with just one stack of narratives, I did not want to presume the identities of my students and therefore I also did not prioritize these elements in my analysis.

Though my students similarly positioned themselves as conquerors or heroic figures based on the challenging circumstances they had to overcome as outsiders/victims, they found "success" in learning to conform to the norms of a discourse or feeling like an "insider," which is quite the opposite to the students in the study Williams notes. Where his students rebelled in order to feel empowered, my students described how fitting in made them feel successful. In one of my student's essays, the writer describes his experience first stepping into his middle school English classroom:

> "Mark, can you read the next paragraph for us," my teacher asks. My whole body began to tense up, and my heart started beating at an uncontrollable rate. My face turned bright red, and I began to sweat profusely. I was an outsider compared to everyone else in my sixth grade English class. I knew I was about to make a fool of myself in front of a class full of people at that moment. As I began to look at the words on the page, I drew a blank.

There is a narrative framework at play in this example, where "Mark" sets up the story of his ultimate transformation from being the outsider to an insider, where he has to overcome embarrassment, hurt, and rejection before he can "earn" his status as an insider. It's also interesting to me that in the students from William's piece tend to think of themselves as these sort of rogue, lone wolf figures, whereas the student here, and in many of my other students work, thinks highly of the community, even when feeling oppressed by it, as eventually all it takes is one person to change their opinion and bring them into the insider status.

Based on this assessment, it seems that when students read the literacy narrative prompt, "community" is a positive term to them, one that they value and deeply consider throughout their work, though it is interesting that community to them feels somehow "earned," especially given this example from academic discourse. In other words, to be successful, the student feels that they must earn the respect of the classroom through performative measures, such as being able to use language in a way which matches that of the discourse, in this case the student had to first learn the basics of reading so that they could meet the goals of the classroom in order to feel seen and worthy of being in that spaces. This reveals a lot about how students identify themselves or view themselves

within the classroom. As an instructor, I would be curious to read how students would respond to these insights, to see if they still identify in the same way, and if they are fully aware of how they have identified themselves. This might be a matter of a reflection exercise similar to what Yagelski described, where students might look back on their literacy narratives and review the kinds of "character" they built for themselves in order to further think through how they see themselves as subjects within academic discourse (or in a discourse that perhaps is more personal) in order to think of how they view literacy both in and outside of the classroom.

I noticed throughout the literacy narratives which focused on more personal discourses that students often thought of success and winning in terms of tangible achievements. One student in particular, who wrote about his time as a hockey player, writes, "I wouldn't know till about a year later how to truly play the positions, but I understood the main goal, score." He describes how his "mental state" improved from both support from his community as well as winning games and performing well. He also says, "We ended up creating our own group chats so we could go skate or play pick-up games together, or even just going to the local chick-fil-a after practice and play parking lot football. We would also support each other and run drills to help get each other better, no matter what trash talk we would have to each other off the ice. The trash talk was a part of the friendly competition among us." In this instance, even if they used "trash talk," the student still felt a sense of togetherness and pride given that his teammates were interested in his success and improvement. This idea of success runs into stark contrast with the anxiety, fear, and embarrassment that often occurred with these success stories. While there were students who did not explicitly use these words, the narratives tell a similar tale of

triumph over fear. This is true for both students who wrote about their classroom experiences and students who wrote about outside discourses.

Students using words like “Hard,” “Easy,” and “scary” characterized themselves as being the heroes of their own story, overcoming some kind of struggle so that their circumstances became easier. Though there were some students who mentioned having some trepidation or anxiety in taking on a new discourse, many of them did not go into depth in their reflection on these experiences. Rather, they seemed to focus on what made them feel accepted and ultimately integrated into these communities. Thinking back to the prompt, students are given several directions that I would like to highlight: first, their narrative must convey a specific point. Second, they should explain what genre(s) allowed them to engage in a discourse. Third, they are directed to “tell a story” using details to think about “language, identity, and community” while describing a “transformative learning experience.” In other words, the student is basically asked to write a story about a time they entered a new discourse community by means of learning new genre and language norms, and to describe their transformation.

I wonder what the phrase “tell a story” must have indicated for students’ understanding of this assignment, and in what ways it impacted their experience in writing, and their view of themselves. It seems like many students made themselves into characters in their own stories, choosing a familiar archetype about “identity” and “learning” to characterize themselves. While this archetype is not inherently “bad,” I would suggest that based on the samples of my students’ literacy narratives, they are thinking of their experiences as writers and literate subjects as “story,” which led to less complex narratives where they aren’t necessarily questioning their positions. It seems rather that they are

simplifying their roles into a familiar archetype in order to "tell a good story" as opposed to complexly reflecting on their experience to reflect and unravel something new and exciting about what their past may convey about themselves. Also, that students must have a "main point" to their narrative may feel reminiscent of a story's moral lesson, so students may have felt that given their papers were supposed to reflect an overarching thesis that they were not able to use this as a reflection, but closer to an essay where they know what they will say before they say it. I'm sure that other FYW instructors can relate to the struggle to help break students out of this perception of writing, where they see it as a sort of display or performance to show the teacher and their audience that they are knowledgeable about their topic and are able to articulate an argument from beginning to end. It seems likely that students will look at the "main point" and consider what kind of lesson or argument they want their paper to make before they even begin writing, and given that their paper is to be written as a story, it feels expected that they would look toward familiar archetypes to convey a message, instead of going beyond the scope of the assignment to reflect deeply on the kinds of identities and communities they describe.

To reiterate, the archetype of the "outsider" joining the team is not wrong per se; however, it does seem to diminish the students' reflections of themselves as complex subjects within discourses. Instead of being asked to reflect on a *transformative experience* in a *transforming way*—that is something about the experience of writing about joining a new discourse community opens their eyes to knowledge about themselves as subjects and writers in present discourse—or to think through the tension between their discoursal past and present, students were asked to think about the "genre(s)" norms of a discourse. They were not necessarily asked to reflect on how their previous cultural, social, and linguistic

identities within this discourse. This to me seems to reinforce the dichotomy between what students will see as "academic" vs. "personal" discourse, and the kinds of discourse norms that may be found in both of these spaces, as students are more likely to focus their experience on a particular discourse, not about the tensions and intricacies that arise from "merging" discourse identities, which I believe the literacy narrative should ideally elicit.

While students mentioned how past experiences may have impacted their ability to "fit in" to a new space, there was often not much nuance to these details. For example, one student, Molly, discusses her experience moving to a new town and joining a private school. In this experience, she talks about feeling initially isolated in this new school because she did not dress the same as the other girls in their class. Though they wore uniforms, the other girls would come to school with their makeup and hair done, and with designer shoes and accessories on. Molly describes how she went home that evening and began to watch makeup tutorials on YouTube and wake up earlier for school in order to put more effort into her beauty routine. Ultimately, she details her "in" into the community when another girl approached her at school, and they quickly became friends. There is no description of how the conflict with appearances did or did not resolve, rather she writes, "As a community we all drove each other to be the best versions of ourselves through tennis, bible studies, and being active in our community." While Molly grew to feel accepted by this new discourse community, she did not go on to further discuss the tensions between her old "identity" as a public school student, and the "new" identity she presumably takes up at this new school in order to see herself as a more complex, nuanced identity influenced by a number of discourses, but rather how she had to "put off the old" to "put on the new" in terms of genre norms and conventions. Perhaps it is not the goal of

the assignment to think of identity in terms of this tension or complexity, or it may be that the assignment itself does not yet make room for this mode of reflection. Before I propose how we might approach the assignment differently in order to expand the literacy narrative toward a more reflexive way of thinking, I would like to assess how my students commonly observed the "teacher" in their narratives to understand how the teachers' self-actualization (thinking back to hooks) or lack thereof may affect students' view of academic discourse, and how to express their own identities in the FYW classroom.

Though a couple students mentioned how "terrible" teachers in their past negatively impacted their adolescent reading and writing experiences, the major theme that I noticed throughout students' literacy narratives was that they mentioned English teachers who played an active, observant role in individual student learning experiences, and cared about the students' mental and emotional well-being. Two students mentioned that in grade school their teachers observed their learning difficulties and supported them. One student said, "I still had teachers that knew about my dyslexia and helped me write my major essays like the one for college and scholarships. But other than that, I was really on my own and I was succeeding by myself." Even with the teacher's support, this student obviously felt responsible for her own writing. At the end of her essay, she writes about how thankful she was for the teachers who supported her: "I am forever grateful to all of them and will never know how to properly thank them for the safety they gave me to grow and be a good student." She also says, "I am so proud that I got into college by myself." Based on these details, it seems like this student was thankful for her teachers who helped her in her writing skills, but ultimately, she craved and appreciated the autonomy that they ultimately gave her to write for herself. There is a slight contrast here, where the student both desires

support from her teachers in building her writing skills, though she is "proud" when she sees the work she did as her own. Though the teacher is present, it seems important for this student to see herself as a writer, and a "good student." It's also interesting that to be a successful writer, this student thinks of writing in terms of being a "good student." While she does not elaborate on what it means to be a "good student," the objectives and goals of her discourse community were also that of her identity as a writer, meaning to feel successful or proud of her writing, she would need to first accomplish the goals of the English classroom.

Another student seemed more interested in how her teachers cared for her well-being. She writes: "I learned that the teachers care more for your health and safety them the grade you made in the classroom." Given that this student was also switching schools and was having a difficult time adjusting to the new atmosphere, it's evident that she appreciated the moments when teachers would look out for her as an individual. This seems to be an especially prominent pedagogical strategy used throughout secondary education. When I was going through the training process to become a certified secondary education teacher, one of the key takeaways that has resonated with my teaching experiences is that relationships come before learning. In other words, it is crucial to prioritize building relationships with students, to make it known that you are interested in their lives, before you teach them. This was used mostly as a classroom management technique to dissuade disruptive behavior and to improve classroom culture, as students are more likely to trust you and to want to learn from you if they feel that you care about them and see them as individuals. Going back to Mark's essay on transferring schools, he describes his teacher and baseball coach in one particular scene:

> He was a short stocky man. I would later find out through simple classroom discussions that he was in the military. Because of this he was strict with the school uniform which that day I was struggling with. He helped me fix my tie and collar as well as pointing out the lack of belt I had forgotten and wrong-colored socks. He informed me that after a few days if I were to forget these items as part of my uniform I would be written up.

Here it is obvious that Mark's coach is a disciplinarian in nature, and he hold his students to high standards. However, Mark did not paint his coach as a stick in the mud or an authoritarian. He holds this teacher in high regards and listens to his instruction. Because this teacher was focused on helping Mark with his uniform, despite how strict the instruction may have seemed at the time, he is focused on building his students up as individuals. Also, Mark notes the "simple classroom discussions" that led him to find out more about this teacher's personal history. The instructor took the time to have discussions with his students that went beyond the curriculum, and it seems that Mark appreciated those moments. Later, he goes on to describe other conversations with the teacher that shaped his experience in this discourse, and while those experiences weren't always positive, as he once got into trouble for using foul language, the interest that the teacher showed in Mark's life seemed to make a big difference in how Mark viewed this educational discourse community. Thinking back to hooks' assessment of self-actualization in the classroom, the instructor sets the tone for how students in the classroom will think and behave. If the instructor is willing to offer students' a glance into their personal lives, to not distance their selves from their teaching, this would better signal to students that they are safe to do the same, especially within their academic

work. In Mark's case, learning a small fact about his instructor's life through "simple classroom instruction" humanized this figure for him, and arguably changed the direction of how he saw this academic community.

After analyzing students use of language in their literacy narratives, I have come to several conclusions that I believe will help us rework the prompt toward a more reflexive pedagogy. First, words used in the prompt like "discourse," "literacy," and "genre" seemed to impede students' writing experiences, perhaps because they did not fully understand how to contextualize these words or because they do not associate these words with their personal discourses. I am inclined to assert this as the use of these words in students' writing often felt a bit shallow and out of context. That leads me to believe that students weren't using these words because they felt they were most appropriate to better portraying their language and discourse experiences, rather they felt compelled to match the formal language of the prompt because they see this as an academic writing assignment. In other words, it seems that students were writing to create a "good product," not necessarily to learn something about their own identity.

Second, students seemed to get held up on the "narrative" direction of this assignment, as they crafted for themselves character archetypes based on the goals of the prompt. Each student discussed some kind of challenge they had to overcome, and in order to be the hero of their story they had to learn to "fit in" with the discourse they described. This archetype makes sense given that the prompt asks them to describe a time when they joined a new discourse. This leads me to think we might rework the assignment in order to see more nuanced relationships with identity and discourse emerge

in students' writing—to help them think of academic and personal discourse identities as more complex and in conversation with each other than they currently think.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: TOWARD A REFLEXIVE PEDAGOGY

Ultimately, while analyzing the literacy narrative assignment in my own classroom has left me with more questions than answers, it unlocked some helpful conclusions about how my students might see themselves in FYW. What I found was very similar to Williams' findings about the kinds of narratives that students told; I will think more closely about what this means for our program specifically momentarily. Just like Williams' students, many of mine saw themselves as the victims/heroes of their own stories. They saw literacy and discourse as obstacles they needed to face in order to be successful or to "win" at whatever particular end—these students evidently see literacy as a tool for becoming the hero/winner of their stories. It also makes sense that students see writing through a product-oriented lens given that they value success in the FYW classroom. Because of how students used language from the prompt, and descriptors to identify themselves in their stories, I posit that students generally are more concerned with writing as a product, a means to an end, than writing as an experience. Based on my analysis, I also can conclude that the literacy narrative prompt likely limited students' understanding and experience of the assignment.

I noticed several limitations to the literacy narrative prompt in my analysis. The first limitation is the direction for students to "tell a story," which I found may have correlated to student's creating specific archetypes in order to meet the expectations of

the prompt. Students may have also created these archetypes due to the fact that when they are asked to think about joining a discourse community, they automatically think about the kinds of challenges they first had to overcome. Nevertheless, students seemed to write more for me as the instructor, and less for themselves as a way to learn something about their identity as writers and subjects within a discourse community. While one obvious solution would be to alter the language of "tell a story," I'm not sure that would be totally effective. Students then may interpret the assignment as strictly "essay," and revert to their formal academic voice. Instead, I would first suggest that in addition to the literacy narrative, students might be directed to write freely in retrospect to the assignment, describing and reflecting on the characters they created with the goal of reflecting on the different identities they created throughout the story. Were the characters in the story truly representative of how they felt in those scenarios? Were there any nuances that they struggled to "get out" in this genre of writing? This suggestion is applicable to any university that uses a literacy narrative, but I think is especially relevant in conjunction with the prompt used in our program—as I have established, because students seemed to write to me as the instructor, it seems beneficial to include a reflective writing piece that is clearly for the students. I would also suggest that this reflection either not be graded, be graded solely for completion, or perhaps not collected at all. It would be critical to ensure students that this prompt is for their own reflection purposes, and that the *experience of writing* ought to be productive, and perhaps even therapeutic, based on Yagelski's notion of how we should emphasize the writing experience over the written product. This change also feels in line with Qualley's goals for reflexive writing—reflexivity meaning students are speaking back to the inner voice that guides

their writing and are therefore in tune with who they are writing for, and what guides their work, in order to have more autonomy over their writing. I think it is perhaps worth asking students here, who are they writing for? By opening up the literacy narrative to not be graded (at least initially) so formally, I think students will be more likely to write for themselves and to feel in control of their own stories.

Next, I would like to suggest how we might get students to think more holistically about their *being* in writing and in discourse, especially new(er) ones. While the prompt asks them to consider "other areas of life where you learned to communicate in new ways," several of my students still wrote about their experiences in academic discourse or spaces, as they most closely related their literacy learning experiences to this place. Also, students were asked to discuss the genre(s) they had to learn in order to enter into a new discourse. Perhaps we could rephrase this to urge students to think more openly about their complex identities as people who are always using more than one discourse. The assignment might instead ask students to *reflect* on the experience of entering a new discourse community, and to consider their identity as literate subjects within this new space. Were there elements of their other "identities" that they felt clashed with the current discourse or gave them an edge? I might also suggest that we directly ask students to explore these tensions. Did they feel like they had to give part of themselves up in a sense to join the new discourse? Did they learn to code-switch or mesh? How did they navigate the genre norms they were expected to use versus the ones they were used to using in other spaces? Looking back on the moment, what can they learn about themselves and their identities that may help them to navigate future discourses, such as the higher academic discourse scene?

These are just some of the questions that I think could productively expand the assignment to incorporate more reflexivity, in that the writer is circling back and engaging with previous literacy experiences. However, my concern would be that some of these questions might feel very foreign to FYW students. It seemed to me that based on their simplistic uses of the prompt terms, the depth of their responses, and some of the questions I had received from my students about this assignment, that this assignment is already confusing to them, as it feels very unlike anything they've written before. Again, this suggestion feels relevant for other universities, depending on their objectives, but I see this as particularly useful for students navigating FYW at USC. One of the main objectives of the assignment was for students to think about their own literacy experiences, and I think this change will give students a better opportunity to do so.

I would also suggest that to alleviate some of the pressure to perform for a specific end, to create a "story" which will earn them a good grade, as that is the mindset most FYW students carry into the classroom, that we might reconsider our grading strategy for this assignment to give students more freedom to delve into the process of writing uninhibited by the consequences of grading. This might simply look like giving students a grade based upon completion for the first draft. While I recognize that the students were given ample opportunities, at least in my class, to rewrite their narratives for a better grade, I would still argue that especially being so fresh out of high school students are stuck in the product-based mindset and they need a stronger push toward understanding writing as a fundamental exploratory experience. By giving them the grace to write this assignment for themselves, I wonder what might emerge in their writing. Based on my own experience as a writer, the most freedom and empowerment I have felt

in my own academic writing has been in classes where the "grade" was not the main focus of the class, such as when instructors implement contract grading methods. While I do not have space to elaborate on this, I will say that I think re-evaluating the grading process for this assignment would be helpful in giving students the space to explore this genre that likely feels completely new, and even intimidating for students.

Finally, as instructors of FYW I think that we should open up the conversations we have in the classroom about ourselves and writing. First, I think taking the time to allow students to talk with students one-one, and to show an interest in their lives can go a long way, as how we treat students (especially in their first year) has implications for how we welcome them into university discourse and specific disciplinary discourses. I recognize that it is not always *easy* to build relationships with students, particularly with classes that just seem to want to remain silent and not engage in dialogue with the instructor—yet, it is a worthy battle, and I believe even small moments of breakthrough can be encouraging to students. Based on what my students shared about their experiences with different teachers, they certainly value instructors who take the time to get to know their students, and to let their students in a little bit on their own lives. If our students have rigid beliefs about the walls of academic discourse, where we must create a new identity in the classroom that ignores the reality of our outside lives, then it seems obvious to me that we ought to *show* our students what we believe about discourse and identity: for me, that belief stems from my continued research on this topic, that identity, writing, and being are complex, and intertwined in the writing classroom and to "disarm" the self and completely adhere to the genre norms of the classroom is not possible, as we are constantly being transformed by our situatedness in all of our writing experiences

which happen over a myriad of places (especially given that the writing done for this class almost always happens outside of the classroom).

To more closely understand writing through this lens of complexity, as always bringing our entire selves into these settings—therefore blurring the lines of what is "personal" and what is "academic" discourse—I see the answer in work from hooks, Yagelski, and Qualley, where we must shift how we treat writing in the classroom, away from valuing the product over the experience of writing, and giving students more opportunities to reflect on their own voices as writers (thinking about what forces drive their writing), while building an engaged pedagogy in which we model these practices through our own processes of self-actualization. To start simple, I think this looks like being honest about the "messiness" of our own writing processes and academic writing experiences.

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