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# The Necessity of Narrative: Personal Writing and Digital Spaces in the High School Composition Classroom

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THE NECESSITY OF NARRATIVE: PERSONAL WRITING AND DIGITAL SPACES  
IN THE HIGH SCHOOL COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

by

CATHERINE COKER RUMFELT

Under the Direction of Dr. Marti Singer

ABSTRACT

In the late 1960s, personal narrative became popular in high school and college writing classrooms as the expressivist and process movements emerged. Since then, personal narrative has recently lost its significance and it is no longer in our writing curricula. In this paper, I discuss the necessity of teaching personal narrative in the secondary composition classroom as it serves an important role in argument. In addition, I will argue for the use of digital spaces to engage students in a critical conversation through narrative.

INDEX WORDS: Expressive writing, Personal narrative, Digital spaces, New media, Composition

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CATHERINE COKER RUMFELT

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Catherine Coker Rumfelt

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my husband Wes, who has supported me throughout this entire process by always telling me that I could do it, listening to my ideas, and cooking dinner.

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## CHAPTER 1.

### INTRODUCTION

As a high school English teacher, I face many choices each year as I decide what to teach my students. While I am limited by curricula and mandated testing, I do have some freedom in what I choose to bring to the classroom. Recently, two topics keep figuring prominently in my reflections on my classroom, and these two issues led me to this research. First, the personal narrative, a writing assignment that has been basically left out of the writing curriculum, continues to be something I am drawn to as a composition teacher. Second, the incorporation of digital spaces and the uses of new media interest me outside of the writing classroom, and are quickly becoming more prominent in our curricula. I have experimented with both the personal narrative and digital spaces separately in my classroom, but never with impressive results. This research examines the idea of putting them together. This study will question the absence of personal narrative as well as defending its use as a way to achieve other writing objectives in the composition classroom. In addition, I will examine how we can use digital spaces in the high school composition classroom to teach personal narrative. While personal narrative by itself is valuable, I believe that we must combine it with other goals in the composition classroom in order for high school teachers to see its value.

In my ninth year of teaching high school English, I routinely assign the personal narrative to my AP students as a study of the narrative mode. Many students seem to enjoy this assignment, sometimes simply from the act of telling about a personal experience; other times, students enjoy writing a story in their own voices, something they aren't typically allowed to do. They can use first person; they aren't writing about something academic, and this often results in more relaxed writing. At the same time, other students are frustrated by the assignment because

they don't know what to write; still others feel that it is a pointless exercise, that it's not scholarly. Regardless, the writing I receive for the narrative assignment is typically fresher and more interesting prose than what I see with a literary analysis or persuasive essay. The writing assignments that are strictly persuasive or analytical often result in writing that lacks voice and energy. Students attempt to write in an "academic" way, avoiding first person, but the result is inauthentic and weak. Academic and personal don't have to be separate, though, if we teach our students how they can work together in writing.

As I examine my own writing assignments each year, I find increasingly that the separation of persuasive and expository writing from personal narrative, what teacher Priscilla Abrahamson calls the "rock and [the] soft spot (14)," doesn't necessarily work. In some ways, this separation is realistic. In college and beyond, the academic and the personal are often separated. Candace Spigelman examines this dilemma in her 2001 *College English* article "Argument and Evidence in the Case of the Personal" when she notes that many academics would approve of their colleagues "telling stories," but not their students. Only writers who have established themselves can take those kinds of liberties (Spigelman, Argument 69). Many of the scholars who examine personal narrative in the classroom also tell of the academic discomfort with it. William Banks, in the same issue of *College English*, notes the "current movements in [his] discipline away from the personal" (22); Patricia Sullivan discusses the "bifurcation of personal writing and academic writing" (43). In discussing personal narratives, Amy Robillard admits that while we assume that professional writers will make a point with their narratives, we don't trust the same of our students (75). She calls for what she terms "a more complex pedagogy of narrative" and wants writing teachers to "make explicit the dependence of analysis and argument on the narrative and vice versa" (91). So as high school composition teachers, we

feel as though we are giving these writers writing assignments like the ones they will encounter in college, and that usually means less personal writing, and more analytical writing. Still, it feels like the way we are teaching academic writing needs a new perspective. Students can consider how to use their personal experience as evidence for arguments. Our own experience counts; our lived experience can contribute to our writing. So we can teach them that if they are writing persuasively, they aren't limited to research from other people; they can use their own lives as evidence. Often in persuasive writing, the narrative mode serves as a powerful tool in argumentation; many effective arguments use personal narrative. Allowing students to use personal narrative can elevate their persuasive writing with more sophisticated, original arguments.

These ideas are not new. Composition researchers have continually examined possibilities for the personal narrative; still, we do not see these ideas flourishing in our high school classrooms. Our curricula look at writing in a very particular way, strictly focusing on other modes and their particular purposes. In the Georgia Performance Standards, the English Language Arts writing standards for high school focus on the following genres: technical writing (9<sup>th</sup> grade), persuasive writing (10<sup>th</sup> grade), and expository writing (11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade). In addition, personal narrative is not mentioned at all at the high school level (ELA Standards). The curricula define the genres strictly, without allowing for the possibility that we could use personal narrative in argument. Our mandated assessments do the same, discouraging more complex arguments in favor of neatly packaged five paragraph essays.

When personal narrative is discussed at the secondary level, teachers mainly focus on its use in memoir writing, freewriting, and building voice (Claggett, Brown, Patterson and Reid 87, Urbanski 62, Kirby, Kirby and Liner 44), what Candace Spigelman calls “writing-as-self-

expression or writing-for-self-discovery” (Argument 70). Writing handbooks for high school teachers do address the personal narrative, but typically not beyond self-expression or journaling. In most composition books for high school teachers, narrative writing is limited to one or two chapters about freewriting or getting started. In Kirby, Kirby and Liner’s *Inside Out: Strategies for Teaching Writing*, personal writing is encouraged and seen as a tool for helping strengthen the voices of young writers (48). Similarly, Cynthia Urbanski sees personal writing as useful for reader response (personal response to literature) or freewriting in a “daybook,” as a form of journaling to get ideas flowing (62, 73, 87).

All of these factors cause high school students to see personal writing and academic writing as two separate modes that cannot ever be used together. Their teachers tell them to avoid personal references in their essays; first person is often forbidden. But there is more to teaching composition in our high school English classes than an end of course test. Certainly, we are attempting to prepare them for college, but we are helping them realize that they have something to say. This research poses the idea that perhaps the two goals of preparation for college and acknowledging the personal as an effective argument can happen simultaneously. The kind of writing that blends the personal with the academic is complex; it asks students to look carefully at purpose, form, and audience. It calls for students to move beyond formulaic writing and into critical thinking about ideas.

Since much of the writing that occurs in these spaces is personal, teaching personal narrative can be combined with the teaching of digital literacy. In order to help students examine the connection between personal narrative and digital spaces, we must help our students will better understand the spaces they are participating in. The final component of this research will focus on the uses for digital spaces as a way to encourage students to write personal narratives.

Even as we overlook personal narrative in the high school writing classroom, many high school students already write personal narratives outside of the classroom. Many students already share their narratives in recently emerged digital spaces. Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and other social networks give students the opportunity to share their stories and write about themselves in purposeful ways (Vie 21). These social networks provide teachers with potential opportunities to engage students in conversations about personal narrative. Students must consider their audience and what they want to communicate to that particular audience. They need to consider how the way that they shape their own narratives affects the way that people read them, a concept that many high school students don't usually consider when writing online. How should they frame their story; how should they shape it; what is their purpose in telling this particular story? When sharing their own stories, students are even more concerned with audience, because they are conscious of how they will be perceived. This consideration of audience is a skill that will also help students write effective arguments. Amy Robillard argues that "telling stories of the past does not limit one to simply telling *what happened*...[but]...involves selection and interpretation" (79). Students must choose what story they want to tell and figure out what it is important. These skills can also translate into critical thinking about other modes of discourse that are already privileged in the high school writing classroom, if we teach our students to view narrative with consideration to audience and purpose.

Composition scholars already view teaching digital literacy as a matter of relevance— if reading and writing is going digital, then we must incorporate digital literacy into our classrooms and help students think critically about it to remain significant as a field (Selber 12). Other scholars take a social stance – Cynthia Selfe examines the links between technology, poverty, and racism in the United States in her book *Technology and Literacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The*

*Importance of Paying Attention.* In her view, if we ignore technology, or refuse to bring it into our classrooms, then we are potentially failing our students, who in some cases might not otherwise have access to this knowledge. In the book, Selfe also argues that our responsibility as educators is to question the connections between literacy and technology and the social agendas that favor technology. Both ideas, social responsibility and relevance, come together when Selfe and Hawisher assert in *Literate Lives in the Information Age* that

if literacy educators continue to define literacy only in terms of alphabetic practice only, in ways that ignore, exclude, or devalue new media texts, they not only abdicate professional responsibility to describe the ways in which humans are now communicating and making meaning, but they also run the risk of their curriculum no longer holding relevance for students who are communicating in increasingly expansive networked environments (233).

For Selfe and Hawisher, it's about giving all students the opportunity to participate in the new literacy that exists in our world as well as continuing our relevancy as a field. Digital spaces are fast becoming part of our composition curricula. Our students need to be able to think and write critically in these spaces, and the combination with narrative can help us achieve these goals. We will be taking that many of them already do – communicate in digital spaces – and ask them to think critically about what they are saying. Furthermore, students are accustomed to discussing audience and purpose in the writing classroom, so we can use these familiar skills in critical thought about digital spaces.

Rhetoric and composition scholars have already seen the significance of digital spaces such as social networking sites in the classroom. Stephanie Vie's 2008 article, "Digital Divide 2.0: "Generation M and Online Social Networking Sites in the Composition Classroom," acknowledges the difficulties of such sites, but also the countless opportunities for teachers to "talk with students about audience, discourse communities, intellectual property, and the

tensions between public and private writing”(21). Within these spaces, students are already writing and thinking without us, and teachers can potentially use these spaces for composition instruction.

My goal is to question the absence of the personal narrative in the secondary composition classroom and explore reasons for bringing the personal narrative back in a new, digital format. Additionally, I will explore narrative as argument and scholarship. What I am envisioning, though, is different from personal narratives we typically assign. I am proposing a combination of academic and personal, writing in which the student refers to experience as evidence or where voice plays a role in making an argument. We must look at the value of the personal narrative beyond personal expression to make it relevant to our students and to teachers. In addition, we must capitalize on the opportunities and technologies for personal writing that already exist for students with these two goals in mind.

## CHAPTER 2.

### PERSONAL NARRATIVE IN MODERN COMPOSITION

Personal narrative has been controversial since its introduction in the writing classroom. Personal writing has been praised and criticized in composition scholarship since the idea became significant at the 1966 Dartmouth Seminar. However, right now, it's just being ignored; current theory simply doesn't address the issue. I still believe that we need to give high school students the opportunity to write personal narratives, because students need to learn that writing about themselves can be a powerful means of expression. It's time to encourage teachers to see the personal narrative as writing with a distinct purpose. My goals for personal narrative are two-fold: I want to give my students the opportunity to write about their own personal experience, and I also want them to know that they can take that narrative further, that they can make an effective argument using that experience.

I am not arguing against the telling of a story just for the purpose of self-expression. I believe that expressive writing is valuable in its own right, and many scholars have argued since the late 1960s that it has value in the writing classroom for various reasons (See Macrorie, Elbow, Murray). High school students also need to realize the connection between personal and academic writing. Students must learn that both types of writing are acceptable and important, depending on their purpose and their audience. If we don't teach them this, students will continue to believe that academic writing should be devoid of personal thought and connection, and this just isn't always true. Of course, this depends on the kind of academic writing that our students are doing. While the Physics teachers at my school probably don't allow personal responses in their lab report, the AP English Language exam I am preparing students for right now encourages students to have a conversation with the sources. In this essay, the readers are

specifically interested in hearing how the student's personal opinion plays into the argument presented. The exam readers argue that "savvy writers converse with sources" and apply their own ideas to the argument (Preparing for the Synthesis Question). In this case, they need to have experience expressing their opinions and experiences.

Right now, high school academic writing is mostly literary analysis and persuasive writing; personal narrative is currently not emphasized. In my own experience as a high school teacher, I have seen that the Georgia Performance Standards for writing do not include personal narrative at all (ELA Standards). In my nine years in the classroom, I have assigned the personal narrative occasionally, but it does not appear on major assessments, such as the Georgia High School Graduation Test or the Georgia End of Course Test. In addition, I find that most of my colleagues find narrative writing to be a waste of time.

In spite of what the curriculum dictates, narrative is valid and valuable, for many reasons. First, I believe that we need to teach students the importance of telling their stories – not just any story, but their own stories. Gian Pagnucci argues that writing personal narratives can be a tool for meaning making, that exploring these stories allows students to examine their own lives (2). He also refers to Kathy Carter's assertion that narrative is complex and expresses "...richness and nuance [that] cannot be expressed in definitions, statement of fact, or abstract propositions" (Carter qtd. in Pagnucci 52). Encouraging students to write personal narratives will help them explore different aspects of writing. Linda Christensen sees writing "as a passage into interrogating society" (VII) and a way to build community in the classroom through students exploring their own lives and the lives of their classmates (7). If we want our students to read the world critically, a good place to start is by thinking critically about their own lives.

Secondly, by developing their experience with personal writing, students learn to build ethos and invite the audience to identify with them, an important aspect of persuasive writing (Spigelman 51). Students can realize that writing personal narratives can be more than purely expressive writing, that their narratives can “make an impact on both writer and reader, on both the individual and community” (Nash 29). We need to teach them that personal narratives can have larger meanings and impacts, that they can make an argument with their stories. Because of the current assessment practices in the high school writing classroom, this connection to persuasion is important. Persuasive writing is the key to many required writing assessments like the Georgia High School Writing Test (Assessment: Georgia High School Writing Test) and the SAT Writing Test (SAT Writing Section). While I don’t believe that we should focus our teaching only to the test, in order for a pedagogy to be useful, we must consider all the practical implications in the classroom.

In this research, I will look specifically at personal narrative. Even though using personal narrative has been debated for years, nothing has changed; we are still not teaching it in high school. In order for change to occur, we need a new approach to narrative. So, I propose this question: what if we revised the way we view narrative in the high school classroom? What if we declared that narrative is an important form of writing that informs all of your other writing, and first person is acceptable to use in scholarly writing? Then, teachers could help students to see the necessity of narrative. In order to make this shift, though, we need to figure out why we are teaching personal narrative, and while it may differ for every teacher, we need to know our motives and our goals when we approach it in the classroom.

## The History of Personal Narrative

In order to understand how we have gotten here, we must explore the history of the narrative in composition. While I will focus on personal narrative mainly in the modern era of composition, narrative as a mode of discourse emerged much earlier in the history of composition. Robert Connors traces it back to Samuel P. Newman's 1827 text, *A Practical System of Rhetoric*, where narrative and descriptive writing are described as "relat[ing] past occurrences, and plac[ing] before the mind for its contemplation, various objects and scenes" (qtd. in Connors 3). Alexander Bain subsequently introduced the modes in his 1866 American version of *English Composition and Rhetoric*, where narration was grouped with description and exposition as "those that have for their object to inform the understanding..." (Connors 3). Expressive writing also appeared very early in the history of composition, according to Lucille Schultz. Karen Surman Paley references Schultz's study of composition history and notes the 1839 textbook *Easy Exercises in Composition*, which encouraged children to write compositions based on their own experiences (11). Narrative has been in our composition classrooms for a long time, presented as writing that gives the audience something to contemplate.

Personal narrative in its contemporary form was realized in the 1960s and 1970s through the expressivist movement and the process movement. In *A Teaching Subject: Composition Since 1966*, Joseph Harris analyzes the effects of the 1966 Dartmouth Seminar, which marked the beginning of an interest in the idea of writing as a process, as well as a call for expressive writing in schools (8-9). Although Harris feels that Dartmouth has been romanticized in many ways (1), he still acknowledges the ideas that emerged from the works of John Dixon, James Britton, and James Moffett, a group he calls the "growth theorists" (17). The focus turned to writing about personal experience, classrooms that fought against the restrictions of school, and

teachers who responded to work instead of judging it (Harris 14-15), as well as a conflict about the language of students conflicting with the ideas of good grammar and form (Harris 11). Harris saw a dichotomy between the American and British views: “The first [American] view saw English in terms of the thing to be studied- literature, criticism, theory, rhetoric, and so on. The second [British view] looked at English much more loosely as a set of teaching moves, practices, and concerns” (13). These opposing views set the stage for a dispute that would continue in our own composition classrooms as we started to explore the possibilities of personal writing. Although many of the theories have been positioned in new ways since 1966, we can still acknowledge that ideas about process and expressive writing did change writing classrooms for the two decades afterward.

The term expressivist (or expressionist) appears frequently when looking at composition research and articles from the past few decades, but scholars often define the term differently. Different words are used to describe this type of pedagogy, and some scholars even question the use of the word “expressivist.” Karen Surman Paley cites an email from Peter Elbow in regards to this term: “I hate the term expressivism...[it] tends to connote that I (or expressivists) are more interested in writing about the self or expressing the self than writing that is trying to be accurate about or valid about things outside the self” (qtd. in Paley 10). Many critiques surfaced as this movement strengthened; critics saw the idea of self as something created and influenced by culture, and also saw the expressivist pedagogy as ignoring the world in which the writer writes (Tobin 12). While these critiques are significant in understanding the current place of personal narrative, I will leave the discussion of the term “expressivist” to other scholars, and rely on Christopher Burnham’s definition of expressivist pedagogy. Burnham uses the word expressive or expressivist to describe the movement that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as a

response to current-traditional rhetoric, where personal writing was seen as a way to express beliefs and social commentary, and voice was a prime concern (24). In addition, expressivists drew from James Britton's language theory and James Kinneavy's expressive discourse analysis as a theoretical base (Burnham 24-25). James Kinneavy discusses the expressive discourse as something "ideologically empowering" (Burnham 25). Expressivism was more than simply self-expression or reflection, even though those elements were there; it was also about the power of the writer's voice to create change. This aspect of the expressivist idea is what makes it relevant in the classroom today, especially when we are asking students to combine the personal with the academic.

While personal narrative wasn't explicitly stated as the only goal of the expressivists, it was often the medium in the writing classroom. In 1979, Richard Fulkerson uses the term "expressive" to mean a philosophy of composition that focuses on the writer (343), and he goes on to more broadly define expressivists as those who "value writing that is about personal subjects" (345). James Britton defines expressive writing as "writing that assumes an interest in the writer as well as in what he has to say about the world" (159). More recently, in *I-Writing: The Politics and Practice of Teaching First Person Writing*, Karen Surman Paley defines it as "a pedagogy that includes (but is by no means limited to) an openness to the use of personal narrative..." (13). In the case of Fulkerson, narrative is very much separated from the other philosophies of composition that he explores in his essay, whereas Paley sees a broader use of the term that includes narrative with other modes of writing. In Fulkerson's essay, the only time personal narrative is mentioned is in the section on expressive writing (346). Christopher Burnham sees it as a pedagogy with the writer in the center (19). What all of these definitions

have in common is that the focus is on the writer and what she has to say; in other words, the writer's voice is valued in expressive writing.

The idea of the writer's "voice" was another important idea in the expressivist movement. This term, much like expressivist, has been defined in several different ways since it first surfaced in the 1960s. For the expressivists, voice was connected to authority in a text; it meant that the author had a right and the ability to speak, and that voice was a source of that writer's individual truth (Yancey xi). The expressivists connected the writer's voice to the idea of discovering self. In his 1968 essay, "A Method for Teaching Writers," Peter Elbow writes: "Now this capacity to write words which contain a voice may not be everything. We all know students who have it and yet still write poor essays. But it is a lot. I think it is a root quality of good writing and that we should try to teach it" (120). While Elbow admits in this early essay that this idea of voice is somewhat intangible, he still insists that it is important. Then, the idea of voice seemed to be indefinable, a quality that one could hear or feel in a text, but not necessarily explain. Later, as the word became a part of our composition classrooms, other scholars tried to define it. Anthologies of essays focused only on voice have attempted through the years to explore the issue. Kathleen Blake Yancey's edited collection *Voices on Voice* analyzed the metaphor of voice as it continued into the 1990s. For example, teacher Margaret Woodworth defines it as "a composite of all the rhetoric and stylistic techniques a writer chooses, consciously or unconsciously, to use to present his or her self to an audience" (146). For Woodworth, voice is a presentation of self, how the writer wants the audience to perceive her, similar to ethos. In the same volume, Toby Fulwiler analyzes the difference between his public and private voice as he searches for his actual voice, eventually realizing that his public voice is constructed by the community in which he writes (44-45). In the concluding chapter, Yancey and

Michael Spooner establish that while authenticity appears to be one of the features of voice, it changes; even as your voice changes, it can remain authentic, which points to the multiple selves that Fulwiler discusses (309). Both Woodworth and Fulwiler's definitions, while different, can be useful when discussing personal writing in the composition classroom, especially acknowledging the idea that perhaps as writers we don't have one voice, but many.

At the same time the expressivists gained prominence in composition studies, the process movement surfaced. While narrative writing was not at the center of this movement, the process movement helped bring the narrative back into prominence in the composition classroom, because this movement developed, similarly to the expressivist pedagogy, in response to academic writing that was deemed constricting and rulebound. It was a fight against "uninspired writing"; teachers realized that students might have something important to say (Tobin 5). For writing teachers, the focus became the act of writing and the writers themselves (Bloom 33). The focus shifted from product to process. Donald Murray elaborates on this in his 1972 essay, "Teach Writing as a Process, Not Product":

It is the process of discovery through language. It is the process of exploration of what we know and what we feel about what we know through language. It is the process of using language to learn about our world, to evaluate what we learn about our world, to communicate what we learn about our world. (4)

Clearly, the ideas behind the process movement inform the ideas of the expressivist movement. Murray states that the process involves "what we know and what we feel about what we know," which points clearly to expressivist ideas about voice and self-expression. The two ideas were so connected that many scholars used the terms "process" and "expressivism" interchangeably (Tobin 9). Murray continues in the essay to develop implications for the classroom that reveal an expressivist perspective; the student must use his own language, write in any form that will help her find ideas, and worry about grammar afterwards. The final implication represents what

some teachers embraced about this movement, even as others criticized it: “There are no rules, no absolutes, just alternatives. What works one time may not another. All writing is experimental” (6). This powerful statement shows that the ideas of the movement were anchored in resistance toward the old ways of current-traditional rhetoric. In *Uptaught*, Ken Macrorie presented radical ideas about writing: “at the beginning there must never be discouragement, only encouragement or no comment at all” (28). These passionate calls to action were inspiring to teachers who felt confined by the old approaches, but also created discomfort about how to approach it in the classroom. This desire to embrace the ideas of process and expressivism conflicted with the realities of the classroom. Eventually, this conflict led to rigid interpretations of process that were the antithesis of the movement: “[on Monday] their students must do ‘prewriting’; on Wednesday they must ‘draft’ their papers; and on Friday, without fail, they must ‘revise’ them” (Couture 30). This interpretation of the process movement as a strict regimen helped hasten the demise of the personal narrative in our classrooms today.

The process movement and the expressivist movement together represent what Lynn Z. Bloom refers to as “The Great Paradigm Shift” (31). This was a major shift from the previous focus of writing classrooms, where topics were given and rules narrowly defined the writing assignments, what some compositionists describe as current-traditional rhetoric (Burnham 22). Current-traditional rhetoric “emphasized academic writing in standard forms and ‘correct’ grammar (Burnham 22). Sharon Crowley shows us these classrooms:

In the current-traditional classroom, teachers required students to read the textbooks they assigned; they lectured about the prescriptions given in the textbooks; they analyzed the finished essays to show how their authors had adhered to textbooks prescriptions and they asked students to complete textbook exercises that drilled them in the current-traditional prescriptions about grammar, diction, style. (147)

This type of writing classroom led to the formulaic writing that we still see frequently today; ideas such as the topic sentence, the thesis statement, and the five paragraph theme are all part of the “current-traditional” rhetoric (and are still prominent in the high school English classroom).

Narrative played a huge role in the expressivist movement. Because the movement was a reaction to a rigid type of teaching, a freer type of writing became important in some composition classrooms. The personal narrative that focuses on expressing the experience of the self with little concern for form is the opposite of a formulaic five paragraph theme that follows strict rules of content and form. Thus, the personal narrative rose to prominence as many of the activities encouraged by process scholars and expressivists, such as freewriting, often led to narratives that were personal in nature. In the introduction to *Telling Writing*, Ken Macrorie writes about “truthtelling”:

But it’s truthtelling that does the most to release language powers. We ask for truths to the world out there, which can be verified; and truth to the world inside, the writer’s feelings, which no one can verify... When we write our [truths] we hear the people we’ve known, and remember the things we’ve seen. They belong to us. The voice we hear making words on the page is one of ours; it sounds like us in conscience. (7)

For Macrorie, the benefit of this kind of writing was not only that the “voice” was more like the writer’s own voice, but that the words were stronger; it was the best kind of writing. For Macrorie and other proponents of expressive writing, telling the truth meant a focus on voice and real writing about real things. Macrorie sees this writing as the opposite of phony academic writing, what he calls “Engfish,” the “phony, pretentious language of schools” (11). Personal narrative became the mode of choice, the way to fight against this phony writing, and the best way to express voice and ideas. In *Uptaught*, Macrorie uses personal stories, descriptions of students, and samples of their writing to shape an argument for expressive writing in the composition classroom. His argument is not bolstered by theory, just his own experience in the

classroom and his own reading that lead him to draw conclusions. He also examines how universities and other institutions systematically oppress student thought in writing, even comparing students to slaves (Macrorie, *Uptaught* 60). For Macrorie, this type of writing was about using any means possible to champion a previously unheard voice. Both of these books focused on the power of voice to create change and to fight authority. Macrorie's expressive writing did more than just share a story, but moved beyond that into argument. This narrative with a purpose is what we need to recapture in our composition classrooms today.

The expressivist tendencies of many teachers were challenged in the 1980s and 90s when a call for a return to the classics developed and the modes of discourse came back into popularity (Tobin 7). Even though Robert Connors examines the rise and fall of the modes of discourse in 1981, the reality in classrooms was that a process backlash was beginning to occur, and traditionalists were calling for a return to rules, grammar, and structure. The five paragraph essay returned to prominence, and narrative was seen as something emotional that lacked structure. While scholars were still discussing personal writing, the focus shifted. The questions became ones about audience as well as a discussion of pathos and ethos as it relates to Aristotle's original definition. This era, I think, truly marked the beginning of the division between narrative modes and other modes. Teachers had to choose what kind of instructor they wanted to be: one that focused on the writer, personal expression, and voice, or one that focused on the product, standards, and precision (Lunsford and Ede 79, Tobin 4). When faced with this choice, many teachers reverted back to what they knew, and the personal narrative began to disappear from composition classrooms.

As we continued into the 1990s, rhetoric and composition scholars began to debate the personal again. Most notably, two separate issues of journals – *PMLA* and *PRE/TEXT* – had

issues devoted to the idea of personal writing and scholarship. In addition, teachers like Lad Tobin and Mike Rose renewed the idea of writing with power, but this time writing became more about social justice and cultural critique. Personal narrative writing was no longer seen as purely expressive, but as critical thought about self, society, and identity. This trend continued into the early 2000s, but the conversation has recently slowed. This shift in the personal is what we need to reexamine in our classrooms today.

While it is virtually impossible to cover every aspect of the discussions that have occurred about voice and writing, in general, the critiques in the post-process era concentrate on several ideas. First, critics feel that process theorists implied that there was one linear writing process, when in reality, writing cannot be reduced to a process (Breuch 97). Also, the writing that was encouraged seemed to happen in a vacuum, ignoring race, gender, and context (Tobin 12). Now we realize that writing happens in a culture, a community; it is also social and that we must consider those things, as well as other things that influence our selves as we write (Elbow, *Forward* 14).

Post-process critiques also focus on the flaws in the metaphor of voice— even Peter Elbow, a pioneer in voice, acknowledges that there are problems with this idea (Elbow, *Reconsiderations* 168). In addition, Mary Minock questions one of the main arguments for expressive writing, Britton's idea that expressive writing can lead to academic writing (154). Instead of seeing personal writing as a first step toward academic writing, Minock instead encourages the idea that expressive writing is “a dialogue with self, or with others, and or with ideas” (168), based on Kinneavy's ideas. Expressive writing has moved beyond the self. As theorists studied the ideas of the expressivists, many realized, as Cathy Davidson argues, “whether we put ourselves in or think we are leaving ourselves out, we are always in what we

write. (qtd. in Holdstein and Bleich 6). All writing is personal, even our scholarly works. Instead of ignoring this idea in the high school classroom, we should embrace it, and acknowledge that students have something of themselves to offer when they write. If we are in everything we write, and writing is a dialogue with others, then we need to teach our students this as well. Their writing is personal, but it is public as well.

We have the benefit of hindsight when examining the history of composition; we can draw conclusions about what worked and what didn't. If we want to incorporate personal writing back into our classrooms, we should consider these critiques. In spite of these criticisms, most composition teachers would acknowledge that students tend to be more invested in writing that they can relate to. There are also parts of the expressivist and process movements that worked and still work. Incorporating those aspects into our classrooms can help us revive personal narrative. Right now, personal writing is completely separated from academic writing in the high school classroom. We have to help our students understand that this separation isn't always necessary, because everything we write is personal. We can't exclude who we are from our writing; our experiences define us. I want to also acknowledge, though, that the personal is also connected to the social and the public. When I write, I write as myself, which includes my identities as a teacher, a twin, a wife, a daughter, a dog lover, a musician, etc. All of these identities connect me to the culture and people that surround me and inform my understanding of the world. Trying to separate myself from this in writing can result in what Deborah Tannen calls "the depersonalization of knowledge" (Holland et. al 1152). She continues: "knowledge and understanding do not occur in abstract isolation. They always and only occur among people" (Holland et. al 1152). Encouraging our students to use the personal in argument acknowledges the fact that all writing is situated, that students come to the table with socially constructed

identities, that their writing is influenced by what they have read and studied (Spellmeyer 269-270, Holland et. al 1147). At the same time, Spigelman argues in “Argument and Evidence in the Case of the Personal” that personal writing for academic purposes should not be “self-disclosive, neither should its ends be emotive and self-serving” (71). We must acknowledge this public aspect of writing to make the personal work; it cannot always just be for ourselves.

While post-process theories and questions about expressive writing flourished in the 1990s, the conversation has changed. Examining *English Journal* articles from the last five years shows that personal writing is not central in the high school composition discussion, with a few exceptions (for example, Rebecca Gemmell’s “Encouraging Voice in Student Writing” and Jennifer Wells’ “It Sounds Like Me: Using Creative Nonfiction to Teach College Admissions Essays”). Composition teachers are focused on other issues, for example, “digital media, public writing, service learning” (Elbow, “Reconsiderations” 171). These issues have taken a prominent position in scholarship on composition. While these are significant matters, the discussion of the personal narrative feels unresolved. Recently Peter Elbow discussed the question of “voice” as something else that feels unsettled: while scholars and theorists aren’t talking about it anymore, it’s still around in our classrooms, on the Internet, in things we read and things we write (“Reconsiderations” 170-171). So while the personal narrative has sustained a place in our conversations, it remains an unsolved dilemma for many high school composition teachers. While our classrooms are dictated by the curriculum, we can make choices about how we meet the objectives given to us, and we want to make the right choices for our students. In order for high school composition teachers to consider the personal narrative, we must bring it back into the conversation. As we acknowledge that everything we write is personal, teaching students to feel comfortable with the personal in writing is important.

## **Personal Narrative as Argument and Scholarship**

When the idea of modes of discourse reemerged in the 1980s, narrative and descriptive modes took a secondary place to persuasive and expository writing. In the classroom, the “impersonal” modes – persuasive and expository – were deemed more important and necessary to students. In addition, relying on the modes of discourse meant that many composition teachers taught that narrative and persuasive writing must be separate, that they can’t necessarily work together. Unfortunately, it seems that some high schools – who tend to lag behind colleges in adopting ideas about composition anyway – are still in this place. Narrative is seen as mainly expressive writing, through journals, personal essays, and personal responses. It has a small place in the curriculum, if any, while expository and persuasive writing are deemed more important. For example, the Georgia High School Writing Test is a persuasive essay prompt, so much of the junior year is spent preparing students to respond to that prompt, which means that much of the writing is persuasive in nature. Persuasive writing is an important mode for students to learn, as much of the writing they do outside of the English classroom is persuasive, but we don’t need to eliminate personal writing in the process.

While we often ask our students to omit first person pronouns, we are not taking out the personal aspect of writing by taking out “I”. So why don’t we encourage students to examine this aspect of their writing and use it to their advantage? Our students are people with backgrounds, cultures, and experiences. Their responses to literature are informed by what they have experienced, and the things that they believe are also shaped by the experiences they have had, even though they are still young. The way they experience life is informed by their views of themselves, so personal writing can help them explore those views. For example, my AP students are currently writing a research paper in which they explore a contemporary controversy

and what that controversy reveals about the American identity. One of my students has lived in the United States for 12 years; her parents moved here from Korea when she was 4 years old. She chose to write about immigration because the topic is particularly close to her as she decides if she wants to pursue American citizenship. As she began to write the paper, she asked me if she could incorporate her own experiences as an immigrant, and what she has observed of her parents' experiences. "Of course you can," I said, surprised. "So I am allowed to use first person in this paper?" she asked, wide-eyed.

After class, I thought about how her experiences would strengthen the argument of the paper: she has firsthand experience as an immigrant to the United States; she is struggling with the conflict between her Korean identity and her American identity. The striking thing is that she did not even consider that her experiences might be significant; she viewed the data she found on graphs and charts in the media center as real research while her experiences didn't count. In argument, the connection of personal and academic often makes the strongest impact. Thomas Newkirk references George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" as an example of an essay that shows the writer experiencing some sort of transformation (13). Orwell's narrative, which mainly consists of a description of his experience killing an elephant in a Burmese village, has few moments where the reader realizes that Orwell sees the larger significance of these events. The narrative that takes us there is arguably much more powerful than a strictly academic argument about the nature of imperialism. We sympathize with Orwell, we hurt for the dying elephant, and then we translate that experience when he does, into a larger comment about colonialism. Candace Spigelman views the combination of academic and personal as creating deeper meaning in an argument (94). In the same way, my student might create a robust

argument by examining the issue of immigration through her personal experience combined with the data and research she found.

Even though I believe that writing is always personal, it isn't always necessary to explicitly acknowledge personal experience. Because students will have to make choices as writers about personal narratives, we have to teach our students about audience and purpose. In much of the scholarly writing about composition, personal writing is valued, sometimes even encouraged, although in other fields this is not the case. Many of our students leave the classroom believing that they cannot use first person in any academic endeavors. Sometimes acknowledging the personal can be an effective way to express an idea or make an argument. Spigelman defines "the personal" as "a particular way of conveying information that seems to be representing an autonomous writer's unmediated reflection on his or her 'authentic' lived experience" (*Personally Speaking* 30). Viewing the personal this way means that it moves beyond mere expressive writing; it becomes a purposeful reflection of experience, with the writer focused on conveying something specific about her experience.

Considering this, a teacher needs to decide on her goal when attempting to teach personal writing in the classroom, and will probably have to be explicit in discussing the differences to students. Are we just letting them journal or freewrite in preparation for something else? Are we helping them structure an academic paper with personal ideas? Why are we incorporating personal experience? How does it strengthen the argument? When I started teaching, I taught the personal narrative because the other experienced teachers told me that it was an easy place to start; it was easy for kids to write about themselves. Obviously, there needs to be more focus on why we are incorporating the personal narrative. We must be focused in our writing instruction in order for the personal to make sense to our students.

Personal stories are often the most convincing arguments. In 2004, I ran a marathon for the American Stroke Association, and I was given a fund-raising goal of \$4,000, which initially seemed like an enormous amount. I was running the marathon in honor of my father, who suffered a massive stroke in 2001. After his stroke, my dad couldn't walk; he couldn't talk; he couldn't do anything. He had to relearn everything; how to feed himself, how to read, how to use his hands. In addition, it affected my life and the lives of my sisters; we became his caretakers, we were suddenly responsible for the man who had raised us. I told this story again and again to my family, to my students and colleagues, to strangers. I easily raised the money, and my teammates, struggling to meet their goals, wondered how I did it. I told people my story, I replied. People wanted to hear my story, and I wanted to tell it. My story was my argument.

Stories have been used as a form of evidence for years, even though they weren't always personal. When examining narrative as argument, some scholars view using narrative as a nod to Aristotle. Spigelman argues that Aristotle discusses narrative as used in both judicial and epideictic rhetoric, even though it didn't look like the personal narrative we see today (Spigelman, *Argument* 72). Aristotle's *Rhetoric* encouraged rhetors to draw examples from real life that the audience could connect to (Spigelman, *Argument* 56). Admittedly, society and understanding of knowledge was different in Aristotle's time as contemporary ideas about knowledge differ from ancient assumptions (Crowley, *Methodical Memory* 3, Lunsford and Ede 40). In Aristotle's time, writing was seen as a social act as rhetors turned to "socially agreed upon topoi" to develop arguments (Bawarshi 57). The community held shared opinions, which in some ways is a foreign concept in modern invention (Crowley, *Ancient Rhetorics* 22). In some contemporary views of writing, ideas and knowledge come from the writer, not the community around her (Bawarshi 59). Invention is often seen as a private act, even though many scholars

argue against this view (Bawarshi 59, Crowley, *Methodical Memory* 54). In order for the personal to be of value, we must go back to these ideas about the public nature of writing and the influence of the culture that surrounds us.

In 1968, Peter Elbow also referenced Aristotle when he called for a new kind of writing classroom, one in which “students will be asked to write pieces for which the test is not whether the assertions make sense or are consistent but whether the reader feels the writer in the words—whether the reader believes that the writer believes it” (122). Here the focus is still on the writer, but the audience is invoked – are they convinced by the words of the writer? Elbow looks at Aristotle and his ideas about presenting an argument from the perspective of C.S. Baldwin: “I begin with myself; for the subject-matter else is dead, remaining abstract. It begins to live, to become persuasive, when it becomes my message. Then only have I really a subject for presentation” (124). Elbow’s ideas are important when looking at a contemporary place for personal narrative, because this view shifts the focus beyond the writer to the audience. Students who are writing personal narratives must consider how to communicate what they believe in their narratives. Here, Elbow shows that the audience is important – the reaction that the audience feels is his major criteria for assessment. Classical scholar Walter R. Fisher sees narrative as a stronger argument than more common forms of rational argument. He sees narrative as “broader in its scope than other paradigms, embracing many ways of telling, including the scientific” (Fisher qtd in Spigelman, *Argument* 74). All of these writers argue that telling stories to an audience and convincing that audience is an essential part of argument.

What this means is that we may have to redefine the personal narrative for our students. Personal writing isn’t always personal, and when we use it to forward an argument or to draw a conclusion about life, it becomes more than personal, because it is part of a larger conversation.

I'm not saying that writing isn't ever private. I'm simply saying that sometimes what starts as private can lead to a public conversation. Peter Elbow argues that helping students find appropriate occasions for both private and public writing can help students, that the public and the private support each other (Forward, 14, 18). Jane Danielewicz agrees, arguing that "a *public* voice is not something intrinsic to the writer, but results from the writer's engagement and position in the world" (423). Giving our students these opportunities will help them see why their voices matter.

In a way, we are also redefining scholarship. We must ask ourselves what it means to be a scholar. Robert Nash redefines scholar when he discusses his Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN); to him, "scholar" means playing with ideas, building on others ideas, and helping people reexamine their lives in light of yours (45). This new definition of scholar champions the experiences of our students. Claudia Tate expands on this idea:

We literary scholars can help our students see how an ever-expanding plurality of personal and cultural narratives determines all our identities. This is cause for celebration, not for anxiety and nostalgia. By making personal sites public and by realizing that there's no boundary between our scholarship and our political commitments, we can give meaning and voice to those identities. (1148)

Tate's view acknowledges the power of our narratives as they help determine our identities. Having our students share their experiences can also help them "recognize and value the distinctiveness of individual lives and circumstances" (Danielewicz 435). Sometimes having an audience, a public space in which to share their stories helps students realize that they have something important to add to the conversation.

This conversation should be part of the high school composition classroom. Our students should be able to consider their own experiences as part of their authority as writers. I am a scholar and I have a degree; but I do not have the same experiences as my students. I have never

lived in another country; I have not experienced someone questioning the authenticity of my American identity, as my student did. In the case of her immigration paper, she has a story to tell that adds meaning to her argument. She has access to experiences that make a strong case for her argument, so she should use them in her paper. Her narrative will add another level of scholarship to her writing, and will make her voice heard.

## CHAPTER 3.

### DIGITAL SPACES AND PERSONAL NARRATIVE

#### **Digital Spaces**

If we acknowledge that the personal has social implications, we must find ways to engage our students in these ideas and provide them with authentic audiences. One of the most powerful ways to help students examine the social aspects of personal narrative is to look at the digital spaces that exist on the Internet. In these digital spaces, people share personal narratives constantly through posting on blogs, sharing information in wikis, and updating their Facebook statuses. Additionally in online forums, people who have similar experiences and issues ask questions, discuss problems, and give advice. This communication of people across the world shows the power of personal narrative to connect. These spaces provide examples of personal writing that is also social, and provide opportunities for students to engage in critical thinking about ways to write personal narratives.

These examples show us that digital spaces are very much connected to the idea of narrative. First, the web provides many opportunities for anyone to express their ideas publicly. As Gian S. Pagnucci and Nicholas Mauriello discuss in their introduction to *Re-Mapping Narrative: Technology's Impact on the Way We Write*, the Internet breaks down the barrier previously erected by ideas of academic literacy by allowing many different voices an opportunity to speak (4). Essentially anyone with access can publish online, so a new set of writers and thinkers can share their ideas. Students are more apt to share their personal narratives in the digital spaces that they are accustomed to, and they don't feel restricted by writing rules. Writing is no longer privileged to the academy, and the absence of a barrier allows for unique voices. Because of this accessibility and wider audiences, the narratives shared online are

different from the narratives in the composition classroom, and as writing teachers, we have an opportunity to connect these narratives.

Digital spaces should be incorporated into our composition classrooms for several reasons. There is a new narrative in the various digital spaces that students access daily. Some of our students write all the time, not for a grade or because we tell them to, but because they want to. They are writing on email and chatting in Google Chat; they are writing notes on Facebook and updating their statuses on Twitter. They are telling stories because they want to, and we can't ignore that. In 2004, Kathleen Blake Yancey asked this question: "Don't you wish that the energy and motivation that students bring to some of these other genres they would bring to our assignments?" ("Made Not Only in Words" 298). Of course we do, and we can, if we consider a new way of looking at writing and reading. Yancey's question is even more relevant in 2009 as more and more online environments provide our students with new places to write and think.

As writing teachers, we also face a continual struggle to create authentic writing situations for our students. Digital spaces can provide that authenticity, because the audience is real and often immediate. When students publish something in online writing communities, their audience is widened beyond the classroom. These types of communities emphasize the public nature of writing and emphasize the idea of writing as a social activity (Lowe and Williams, Peterson 172). The audience is no longer only the teacher. Networks also provide a place where the role of the instructor is decentralized. Students can connect to an audience and receive feedback, which doesn't always occur in traditional writing environments (Peterson 180-181). This building of community is a significant component of online environments, as students writing personal narratives are often encouraged by feedback from peers.

We can't deny that technology has changed writing. Yancey compares the creation of a "writing public" to the technology-driven creation of a 19<sup>th</sup> century "reading public" (301). People are writing in online communities and other "overlapping technologically driven writing circles," and thus a new writing public exists (301). Yancey also calls for a shift in thinking about what composition is, arguing that we cannot ignore technology in our classrooms for many reasons (320). Composition is no longer only about essays in the classroom; it's about conversations that are happening in "the intertextual, overlapping curricular spaces-between school and the public, including print and screen..." (Yancey, "Made Not Only in Words" 320). Acknowledging this shift, composition teachers must use these digital environments to help foster critical thinking and writing of critical narratives.

We can use a space that many of our students are already familiar with to engage in a conversation about the value of sharing their stories while challenging the traditional, academic concept of narrative. In order to this, though, we must introduce digital literacy in the composition classroom. Even though the Internet is such an integral part of their culture, we need to help them "...become producers of their own knowledges rather than consumers of others' knowledge" (Peterson 181). We need to teach them how understand the new media that they will encounter in digital spaces. If we want our students to create visual arguments and write in nontraditional ways, we must show them how. Equipping our students with this new literacy will allow them not only to contribute to the conversation that exists in these digital spaces, but to be critical consumers of what they experience.

High schools are notoriously behind at updating to these new technologies; in some high schools, technology is still a new addition to the writing classroom. Certainly we all use computers for typing papers, but beyond that, many teachers don't know how to incorporate

technology into their composition pedagogy. At my high school, we are encouraged to use computers and the Internet in our classrooms, but I have struggled with a way to make it meaningful for my students. I briefly experimented with student blogs in my 11<sup>th</sup> grade AP Language course in Spring 2006. Students chose an author from the period we were studying in American literature, and created a blog with visuals, author excerpts, and textual analysis. While some students seemed to enjoy the experience, the result was merely an online report. What I envisioned was an excited conversation between students about texts and authors, but I didn't really get that. Instead, they wrote the same thing they would normally write, and simply put it online. While they fulfilled the requirements of the assignment, their blogs lacked critical thinking. Still, these types of digital spaces seemed to have so much potential for use in the classroom that I couldn't let go of the idea.

### **New Media**

In order to give students the opportunity to become a part of this online narrative, we must help them understand new media. Scholars don't necessarily agree on a definition of new media, but the term is widely used. Anne Wysocki, in her opening to *Writing New Media: Theory and Application for Expanding the Teaching of Composition*, asserts that “[a] new media text do[es] not have to be digital,” but one where the materiality of the text contributes to the meaning (15). This definition works for a couple of reasons. Often, when teachers are asked to use technology in their classroom, they simply give their students computers and feel as though they have done their job with technology. In the same vein, teachers (myself included) often feel that when they ask students to complete the same assignments they would on paper but instead they have their students publish to a blog, they are creating new media texts. According to Wysocki's definition, these assignments wouldn't be considered new media merely because a

computer was used to publish. If we are going to look beyond computers as tools, and see them as digital spaces that are connected to wider audiences, then we need to make sure that students are critically considering how their message is constructed (Hart-Davidson, Cushman, Grabill, DeVoss, and Porter). Wysocki's definition challenges teachers and students to consider the physical aspects, rhetorical situation, and different mediums of their text while communicating their message.

In addition to Wysocki's criteria, new media seems to be defined, at the most basic level, by a shift from just text to text, images, and other multimedia (Kress 5, 20-21, DeVoss, Johansen, Selfe and Williams, Jr. 168, Selfe 43). This opens up many opportunities for personal narrative, as students can tell their stories with more than words, but with visual and auditory elements. For example, Craig Stroupe's narrative assignment asks students to write a traditional narrative with a central character, but with a hypertext element to the task (424). The writing assignment itself is non-linear, as many actions are taking place at once (for example, a woman walking into a party who sees different people and hears different conversations) so hypertext allows for a multi-faceted telling of the story. Similarly, high school teacher Sara Kajder encouraged her students who enjoyed reading personal narratives to tell their own stories with movies or still images of places and things they wanted to share (66-67). In *Writing New Media*, the editors envision assignments that range from a visual essay about literacy practices (Selfe, "Toward New Media Texts" 77) to designing website layouts for class analysis (Wysocki 178-179). All of these assignments attempt to achieve different writing goals, but also teach aspects of new media. Certainly, we are introducing students to think critically about image over text, to make them consider communication with something more than words, but our traditional literacy is still there. We are still asking students to write a narrative, but in a different way. Even if

students already know how to tell stories, new media offer a different opportunity for them to communicate their ideas.

When my students were presented with new technologies in my classroom blogging assignment, they didn't think critically. Many of them seemed uncomfortable with an online environment in the classroom, so they just wrote as they normally would in class, and then cut and pasted it into their blogs. In attempting to produce their own digital texts, students did not pause to consider the implications of their choices in font, images, placement of text. Why would they have considered these issues, though, without direction from me? They needed an education in visual rhetoric in order to create effective new media texts on their own. In order to teach our students, writing teachers must acknowledge that the writing that occurs in these spaces is different, that new media does change things for composition, that “we cannot go home again to the days when print was the sole medium” (Yancey 308).

### **Digital Literacy**

As a composition teacher, I will have to educate my students on the types of literacies that are involved in creating these new media texts. The idea of digital literacy is another shift occurring in our classrooms. Definitions of each type of digital literacy and other new literacies vary across texts and scholars, with some even questioning the legitimacy of the terms altogether (Faigley 180, Anderson 59). Gunther Kress takes this idea further, defining literacy very specifically as “the term to use when we make messages using letters as the means of recording that message;” as a result, the term doesn't always work with new media (23). Kress only applies literacy to “writing with letters” (61). Still others, like James Inman, disagree with Kress and use literacy interchangeably with “meaning-making” (159), and concludes that we don't yet fully understand “contemporary meaning-making” (161). The reality is that, as Stephanie Vie says,

“... as a field, we are still wrestling with defining terms like information literacy and technological literacy” (12). Many scholars express a concern, but still use the term to discuss understanding of media, culture and texts (DeVoss, Johansen, Selfe and Williams, Jr. 171, Rivoltella vii-viii, Inman 159).

Defining digital literacy is difficult, but we can agree on certain elements. First, literacy is changing because what our students read is changing (Vie 11, Evans and Po 57, Selfe, “Students Who Teach Us” 44). We are moving from an “alphabetic literacy” (Selfe, “Toward New Media Texts” 67) to the new literacies, ones that incorporate more than just words. Students are immersed in this new culture of technology and we as composition teachers need to help them understand as writers and readers what they are experiencing on a more critical level (Vie 10, Leu, Mallette, Karchmer, and Kara-Soteriou 4, DeVoss, Johansen, Selfe and Williams, Jr. 169). The new literacies still connect to the past, though; the new idea of literacy is not replacing the old one, but it’s changing and evolving (Snyder and Beavis xvi, Inman 162, O’Hear and Sefton-Green 142). As Anderson points out, “it’s not the end of literacy, but a *refiguring* of literacy” (46). For example, Gunther Kress discusses the “multimodal world of communication” as he watches his son play video games, reading the screen and reacting to text. This type of reading, he argues, should be taught as reading for a specific purpose. Not how to win your video game, but how to understand text that is presented differently – perhaps quickly, visually, or in a non-linear way. While it differs from the type of reading we do in the classroom, both are valuable skills, and we should teach them both as different forms of reading, which means instead of valuing one type of reading over another, we are introducing students to many forms of literacy, and helping them recognize that there are different reading strategies for different texts (Kress 174).

In addition, a change has occurred in our society over the last few years; what it means to be literate has changed and the expectations for readers now go beyond the printed page (Leu, Jr., Mallette, Karchmer, and Kara-Soteriou 1, Alexander 1, Kress 1, Selfe and Hawisher 2). New technologies "... [demand] multiple literacies of seeing and listening and manipulating, as well as those of reading and writing" (Selfe, "Students Who Teach Us" 43). While the definitions might vary, the general consensus is that we must expand our definition of literacy to include these new technologies (Leu, Jr., Mallette, Karchmer, and Kara-Soteriou 1, DeVoss, Johansen, Selfe, and Williams 171, Lea 8, Anderson 66, Selfe, "Students Who Teach Us" 54). Selfe and Hawisher conclude that students must be able to design and interpret digital material or "they will have difficulty functioning effectively as literate human beings in a growing number of social spheres" (2).

The reality for the composition classroom is that new media are now part of our students' lives, and as teachers we must try to incorporate this technology in the classroom to develop the literacies of students "whose lives are mediated and circumscribed by digital culture" (Evans and Po 57). Why must we do this? As a composition teacher, my basic goals are to teach my students to read critically and communicate effectively. I want them to also examine their experiences beyond the classroom, and this includes thinking critically about the new media they experience every day.

As I continue to reflect on my blogging assignment, I think I assumed too much about my students. I assumed that they would know how to set up the blogs, and that they were familiar with all of the technology that went along with it. What I found was that even though they are spending much of their time online, they aren't necessarily considering rhetorical choices as they are doing this. In *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age*, Stuart Selber divides digital literacy into

three multiliteracies: functional literacy, critical literacy, and rhetorical literacy (25). Critical literacy, as defined by Selber, involves the student analyzing and questioning dominant perspectives in computer culture, as well as examining representations of computers (96). Here, students are not merely taking what they see at face value, but asking questions about it. Students spend lots of time in digital environments, but they rarely question what they see. I think that students are used to asking questions about printed texts – if their teacher encourages such dialogue – but they are less comfortable analyzing digital environments because it's a different space. They know the routine in the classroom when we analyze texts; they know how to annotate and answer questions. With new media, though, the text might look different, it might not be linear, and they might not know where to start asking questions.

The Internet is also their personal and social space, so it feels separate, perhaps, from academic pursuits. Evans and Po suggest instruction on how reading different kinds of texts is done differently and this can apply to digital texts as well (71). This can lead to discussion on the contexts we bring when we read something, and students can explore their own reactions to work with new media. Many other digital literacy texts also assert that teachers should encourage analysis of new media (Vie 10, Alexander 71, Hobbs and Rowe 231, Evans and Po 57-58). In terms of digital literacy, most of the research concludes that students should be producing new media texts, as well as learning how to read and interpret these texts because the idea of literacy, whether we agree with that term or not, is changing (Wysocki 22, Vie 10, Selfe, “Students Who Teach Us” 55).

Selber divides his final literacy, rhetorical literacy, into four parameters: persuasion, deliberation, reflection, and social action (147). The rhetorically literate student, then, participates in these parameters through understanding of how the interface design connects to

these actions (147). How is a particular website (or other form of new media) designed to persuade? What elements could improve the message? Certainly, students would need knowledge beyond that which we traditionally teach in a composition classroom to achieve this literacy. Students will need to understand the connections between layout and design, and they will also need to experience writing that uses visuals more than text (O'Hear and Sefton-Green 138-139). When students achieve this rhetorical literacy, then they will hopefully be able to start creating meaningful new media texts. If we expect our students to create visual narratives or write in ways that move beyond only printed words, we need to teach them how understand those texts when they encounter them in society.

The use of wikis, which are “website[s] which can potentially be edited by anyone viewing [them]” (Farabaugh 42), also shows the potential of technology to build community. Robin Farabaugh's research on wiki software in her college Shakespeare class shows the capability of this technology to allow students to write with their peers. Farabaugh used the wiki as a central location for writing; students composed together and developed ideas with each other, “lead[ing] to the discovery of larger questions, metaquestions, if you will, about the nature of form and its ability to convey meaning” (54). Her students used the ideas presented in these discussions to compose more formal papers for class. In this case, technology provided a place for the writing process to occur; students benefited from group response.

Online writing communities and blogs can also be valuable in the teaching of narrative. Peterson refers to Linda Brodkey's definition of narrative, one in which the author makes rhetorical choices to represent self, where narratives can be a way for authors to critically understand conceptions of self (177). This concept of narrative can be applied to online environments, where students have to make choices about the self they present. This critical

aspect of publishing online gives our students the opportunity to explore how to present themselves online. Certainly, this raises the question of students constructing a “self” to present (Alexander 105). Jonathan Alexander examined personal homepages of youth and saw that these writers were purposely ironic and satirical to criticize how the self is presented online (106). He argues that this is a blend of “traditional and electronically enabled literacy and compositional practices”; students were writing narratives and critiquing culture at the same time (383, 385). We already have these discussions about traditional writing assignments when we examine the appropriateness of an argument for a particular audience or explore why we choose to say something in a certain way. The immediacy of the online audience provides another consideration for students as they compose.

The public forum, the personal nature of the writing style, and the interactive nature of blogs all provide a different type of writing experience for students. Blogs are more than simple personal journals online. Pioneer blogger Rebecca Blood’s vision of blogging sees a small community encouraging writers to keep writing. In addition, Blood envisions a “writer without a teacher, the writer who is self-motivated and community supported” (qtd. in Brooks, Nichols, and Preibe). This vision of blogging is what many writing teachers want in the classroom, a place where students are encouraging each other and responding to writing and ideas as well as a place where students make critical choices as they consider their audience. In “Blogging in the Classroom: A Preliminary Exploration of Student Attitudes and Impact on Comprehension,” Nicole B. Ellison and Yuehua Wu look at the different types of technology available for students: discussion boards, e-portfolios, and weblogs. While all of these technologies provide different experiences for students, blogs in particular are important for the writing classroom because “the critical skill of writing is central to the act of blogging” (105). Ellison and Wu

found that students generally enjoyed the blogging experience, but also felt a little uncomfortable with it at the same time. The students like the opportunity to write in "a more casual writing voice" (112) and also felt that the feedback from their peers was beneficial. In addition, blogger Stephen Downes asserts that blogging is about more than writing; it's about reading as well as reflecting on ideas (Downes 24). Thus, blogging encourages critical thinking, which we want our students to do.

Upon reflection, I realized that my blogging assignment didn't work for many reasons. When I personally read blogs, there are certain aspects that I enjoy: the honesty of the writer, the comments and conversation that typically ensue after a particularly interesting post, the personality that comes through the words. The blogs I had my students create for class lacked all of those elements. I know that it would be impossible to recreate the characteristics of my favorite blogs in the classroom, but with some fine-tuning I think that this assignment could actually engage students in online discussions about texts or encourage students to write about their experiences. The missing element was the personal aspect which makes blogging unique. In the future, I would consider framing the blogs around the study of a novel or a major writing assignment, and have them form online response groups for that particular assignment. That way, students could blog about their writing experiences, brainstorm ideas with their classmates, or look for responses on drafts. The important factor here is creating an online community. Much of this research shows that community is what draws students to digital spaces. The online environment can be an extension of the group of people in the classroom.

Most importantly, I want to challenge my students to think about writing in new ways. I am inspired by two articles in the Spring 2008 issue of *Computers and Composition Online*: "[Where Ideas are Garbage and All Writing is Free](#)," and "[Digital Mirrors: Multimodal Reflection](#)

[in the Composition Classroom.](#)” The first article uses a dialogue form to discuss the interplay of ideas about freewriting. The authors used different texts combined with their own ideas to “question, challenge, joke, and admit to both our attraction to and avoidance of freewriting” (Eodice, et. al). What excites me with this piece is the conversation among scholars and text. I can easily see one of my AP classes working on a similar assignment with a topic we have discussed in class. I think the non-linear format of the response would help some of my students think more easily through their ideas.

In the second article, “Digital Mirror,” the instructor, Debra Journet, asked her students to compose daily reflections, and made them a major part of the course. She encouraged her students to compose their reflections in multiple modes, resulting in a multimodal project of semester reflections for the class. This project highlights personal reflection and critical study of coursework, which is something that I have tried to incorporate more fully in my own classes.

Additionally, Journet reflects on the course:

Our seminar, not surprisingly, offered no definitive answers, and we are still struggling to understand such issues as what genres we should teach and how we should assess them. But for many of us, constructing and sharing multimodal reflections offered a new way to think about our objectives as teachers, writers, and composers.

For Journet, the act of thinking critically and looking at the class in new ways was rewarding for her students. Sometimes, I think it is difficult for high school students to see the reward in something where there is no definitive answer or solution, so this kind of discussion and critique would be valuable for them as writers and thinkers. Because digital spaces and new media are still new, as high school composition teachers, we should engage in that conversation about what aspects are important in the composition classroom. We can also engage our students in these

conversations about what communication is, and let them explore these ideas in their own writing.

## CHAPTER 4.

### CONCLUSION

This research is a call to action for high school teachers of composition. We need to examine the way we are teaching writing to high school students and figure out a place for personal narrative. As the digital spaces that our students inhabit become a larger part of communication, I believe that personal writing will again become significant in the secondary composition classroom. Since new media are driven so much by our interaction with each other, the public aspect of personal writing will continue to gain importance in the composition field. Thus, I see personal writing in the high school composition classroom moving beyond traditional expressive writing into responses to each other, expressing opinions on issues, and sharing ideas in digital spaces. In order for this change to come to the high school writing classroom, we must continue to examine rationales for using personal narrative and digital spaces. We need to figure out what we believe about voice, identity, writing, and new media, and then inform our composition pedagogies with these beliefs. Otherwise, the personal narrative will continue to be seen as the throwaway assignment that we use to start the semester, and it should be much more than that. This kind of reflective practice is necessary for curricula to change and incorporate new technologies and digital spaces.

Additionally, high school teachers must advocate for new media in their classrooms. While many high school curricula call for technology, many high school administrators and teachers fear the digital spaces in which new media exists. In the county where I teach, network administrators are required to block YouTube, Facebook, and many blogs so neither teachers nor students can access these sites. If we believe in the significance of digital literacy, high school

composition teachers need to acknowledge the role of these types of spaces in our classrooms, and promote their use. We need to begin the conversation and bring our composition classrooms back into relevance. Certainly, combining digital spaces and personal narrative is one way to explore the potential of both forms of communication.

Digital spaces provide a new ground for teaching personal narrative, but teachers must be convinced that both choices are worth the effort. These nontraditional approaches in the high school composition classroom are part of a new era of writing instruction, one in which I believe the personal and public will become more connected in writing as our students' experiences continue to expand across the Internet. When we begin talking about personal narrative, the same concerns about expressive writing always emerge: what do we do with these personal stories? When I mention Facebook to a colleague, often I get the same disgusted response: what do we do about kids these days? Certainly, some problems exist, but that doesn't mean we can ignore these ideas in our classrooms. Admittedly, I do not have all of the answers to the issues we face in the teaching of personal narrative and the incorporation of digital spaces in our classrooms. That is why we must start talking about personal narrative and digital spaces. If we don't consider these issues and examine them in our own classrooms, high school composition won't ever change. My hope is that teachers will see that in spite of potential difficulties, allowing our students to participate in this new, digital narrative is worth it. Once we accept that narrative is necessary in teaching writing, we can begin the conversation, again.

The debate on personal narrative will continue. As I write this, the conversation has started again in various composition and rhetoric journals. Critiques about the metaphor of voice, what constitutes self, and why we should ask our students to write personal narratives will continue to be a part of the composition conversation. Composition teachers will not always

agree on what each term means, and personal narrative may represent something different to each teacher, but we must give our students opportunities to write personal narratives. Thomas Newkirk argues “that it is empowering for students—for all of us—to believe that we can imagine ourselves as coherent selves with coherent histories and can therefore create stories about ourselves; that this coherence, this ‘identity,’ allows for a sense of agency, a trajectory into the future; that we each see the world in a distinctive contribution to it...” (98). While he acknowledges a certain romantic sensibility to this idea of personal narrative, here Newkirk captures much of what I believe is important about personal narrative, especially the idea that our students can make a contribution with their writing. For high school students, finding their own identities as writers can be an important part of their learning process. Discovering that their writing can make an impact on their audience can help students to be more critical of the ways they tell their own stories.

Often in the secondary writing classroom, showing students that their writing has an impact is difficult to do. In school, they are often just writing for their teachers or their peers, a contrived audience. As teachers, we must explore digital spaces that can bring wider audiences to them. Facebook provides a unique place to critically explore how we present ourselves to others and how we choose to tell our stories. Additionally, we can use this space to explore the connection between private and public writing with our students, and ask them to consider how the different voices we have as writers can be used in unique ways. Social networking sites provide us with opportunities to examine how stories connect people and why we are drawn to the lives of others. As research in this area continues, we should examine what draws our students to write in spaces like Facebook and explore how to capture that fervor in our classroom. Certainly, part of the allure is that it is a non-academic space, a social place for them

to express their ideas and converse. Even so, we shouldn't ignore it. Even if we don't bring Facebook into our classrooms, we can try to bring those elements of community, sharing ideas, and telling stories into our composition curricula. We should also ask our students to question these spaces and think critically about the kind of writing they are doing online.

We can also continue to examine the value of social spaces like blogs and wikis as part of building community in our writing classrooms. While personal narrative is one type of writing that occurs in these spaces, students can also respond to each other's writing, discuss ideas about composition or literature, and pose questions about classroom activities. Many opportunities exist for these spaces, but little research exists at the high school level. Composition teachers can explore these technologies to discover what they hold for our writing classrooms.

One way to explore these ideas with our students is through writing assignments like Cynthia Selfe's technological literacy autobiography, an assignment that asks students to explore their experiences with new and conventional media ("Students Who Teach Us" 59). Starting here, students can begin to reflect on their own literacies and the kinds of reading and writing they already do. This type of assignment exposes students to critical thinking about writing and combines those ideas with narrative, a perfect way to introduce students to the exploration of self through writing. After examining their own experiences, students can eventually create a visual essay from this writing assignment, which allows them not only to examine their own experiences but gives them the opportunity to "better understand the communicative power and complexity of visual texts" ("Toward New Media Texts" 74). These are beginning steps in asking our students to think critically, and eventually, we can apply these skills to the digital spaces they use. By asking students to think about their own experiences and create their own new media, we are helping them move from consumers to producers. Then students can begin to

think critically about what they are creating in digital spaces and begin to tell their own stories in new, powerful ways.

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