Crafting Literacy Narratives

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Ella is an engineering student from Columbia; her languages are Spanish, English, and Korean; she’s one of 18 students in an English writing class at a major university in Seoul, Korea. Whether she would recognize it or not, Ella’s use of her languages is translingual, translingual here being a description of how she uses her languages in local practice (Pennycook). (*Do I need to explain this more fully? For example, Ella would greet me with an English hello while bowing Korean style.)* But in writing about her relationship with Korean, the beliefs she brings into the class at the beginning of the semester is monolingual, concerned whether her Korean is good enough to ask questions during “Engineering of Reactions” class. JiHyun is a Korean student who attended international schools while growing up in Guatemala; her languages are Spanish, English, and Korean. JiHyun’s use of her languages can't be but translingual; however in writing about her relationship with English, she at first confesses to the monolingual fear of losing English while living in Korea. This internationally translingual class points to the gap between how language is actually used and the beliefs students have about their own languages even when they are at ease in so many. The fact of being multilingual and the assumptions one has about language use are two different things. Monolingual beliefs are not only the purview of monolingual users. How can the gap between what students think and how they actually use language be bridged? Is there a way to move student thinking to align with what they actually do?

The literacy narrative has been a favorite assignment in writing classrooms. Its virtues have been lauded through testimony, research, and practice (Sharma). Traditionally, and especially in the second language writing classroom, literacy - implicitly carrying a general idea of language whereit's so often discussed as a concept everyone agrees to like “food” that it becomes too abstract to be of much use - is tacitly privileged. But in an international translingual set-up, with a multitude of languages in multitudinous combinations, an unquestioned emphasis on language doesn’t serve students well. However, if approached as the genre that it is named as, *narrative*, the literacy narrative, written in first person, falls under the umbrella of creative nonfiction, putting into play all of the craft tools available in writing that genre. Recasting writing as craft brings it down from the realm of generalization to a terrain that is recognizable, familiar, and doable, one that shares qualities with other crafts that one does like sewing or baking. Conceptualizing writing as craft opens up possibilities for all students, no matter what languages they use, to make meaning out of their relationships with language, using craft moves to show and not just tell. The craft technique of showing forces students to make observations about how they are actually using language in authentic contexts. By privileging how language is used first, and then drawing thinking that aligns with the concrete experience, that gap between how students actually use language and their initial assumptions can be bridged.

More significantly, the emphasis on first person narrative, rather than literacy allows students to approach writing as operating in time rather than seeing it as a static set of rules to follow. As such, Ursula LeGuin defines narrative in terms of what it does: "What it has to do is move - end up in a different place from where it started. That's what narrative does. It goes. It moves. Story is change.” Moving from one place to another takes time. Change happens over time, a lived process rather than a fixed form to master; the mastering is where it’s at. And mastering takes time. This contrasts to seeing writing as form or structure, "spatial, architectural, and silent about the motives for the reader” (Newkirk 2014). Unlike spatial thinking, the foregrounding of time opens up possibilities for changing vantage points in the past as opposed to the present, loosening memories from the constraints of a reductive, sequential understanding of time. Instead of picking and choosing pat memories from an authorized version of one’s life, the one a student has been carrying around for a while so it feels fixed, the reader’s (in this case, the teacher’s) interrogating question “Why is this important to you now?” interrupts this familiar telling with present time, forcing the student to change vantage points from a past telling to now, a telling s/he has yet to do. This changing of vantage points allows for a shift from what Proust deemed as voluntary memory, a “mechanical retrieval function that gives us access to our assembled picture of the past and allows us to zero in on events and sensations as along a grid of recollection” (Birkerts) to the possibilities for discovering what lies in the “living past.”

What underpins this understanding of how memory works is a deep skepticism and questioning of how it feels - solid and true. Most times, impression of an event is made soon after it happens, without reflection and we carry around a general emotional assessment of what happened. “That class was hard.” or "My English isn't good enough." Rarely do we unpack why the class was hard or where we're getting the beliefs about language use from evidence present in the actual events. Quick judgments are made based on what made the most impression at the moment, be it the grade one got in the class or not being able to give a quick reply. And this impression feels right at the moment so we mistakenly take it for the truth of the experience. These impressions are what constitute “the events and sensations as along a grid of recollection.” The impressions become reified over time, part of an authorized version one can easily dip into for sanitized bits of one’s past. What this kind of thinking does, however, makes it feel as if memories are sequential and linear, that they proceed according to the calendar; that they’re fixed on a familiar, tidy chart with subject headings of “good” or “bad,” its simple reductions belying the layered complexities of lived life. Over time, what this kind of habitual replay of staid memories does is to deepen their grooves in the narratives we tell about ourselves, at the expense of ignoring all of the rich contextual details that memory was attached to. By foregrounding the vantage point of the present as the starting point for thinking, we allow ourselves to visit a vital, living past, decoupled from a reductive piece of memory.

As Birkerts observes in analyzing Nabokov: “... the two time perspectives … are essential for the four-dimensional interrogation favored by the genre. The moment of the past is positioned here in both its original setting *and* in the relativistic continuum, as one factor among many in an equation still being solved - as a chess piece (to be Nabokovian) in play in a game yet undecided.” Not only does this “complex temporal access” more accurately represents how life is lived in time, but it intrinsically builds in a mechanism for reflection, to make sense of what *it* means to me now as well as what it means to *be* me now. The ability “to give the reader both the unprocessed feeling of the world as I saw it then *and* a reflective vantage point that incorporates or suggests that these events made a different kind of sense over time,” Birkerts notes, is “transformation,” change in thinking about the past, about oneself that comes through reflection. This double vantage point then shifts reflection from spatial, physical terms (ie. looking at a mirror) and recasts it in terms of Bergsonian time (*how much of Henri Bergson’s concept of duration do I need to introduce? Is it enough to bring in this one quote?*), as “continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances” becoming “the uninterrupted prolongation of the past into the present which is already blending into the future.” (qtd. in Day) The word choices here - continuous process, gnaws, swells as it advances, uninterrupted prolongation, blending - speak to the key quality of time: it's constantly on the move. It is in stark contrast to a spatial concept of time where “time is perceived via a succession of separate, discrete, spatial constructs - just like seeing a film." (philosophynow.org) Present time always carries with it the immediate past as well as all of the past that's been flowing, moving into the now to immediately move onto the future. Hence an evolutionary understanding of biology always looks for evidence of the past residing in the current animal being studied. In similar vein, reflection privileging time over space works in terms of evolution thinking. This understanding is best illustrated by Joan Didion in “On Keeping a Notebook”:

It all comes back. Perhaps it is difficult to see the value in having one’s self back in that kind of mood, but I do see it; I think we are well advised to keep on nodding terms with the people we used to be, whether we find them attractive company or not. Otherwise they turn up unannounced and surprise us, come hammering on the mind’s door at 4 a.m. of a bad night and demand to know who deserted them, who betrayed them, who is going to make amends. We forget all too soon the things we thought we could never forget. We forget the loves and the betrayals alike, forget what we whispered and what we screamed, forget who we were.

Although we live day to day as if we remember everything that we need to and pretend that who we are today is a discrete self, separate from past selves, Didion remind us that the self, being subject to time, undergoes evolution. The past selves inform who we are today. Forgetting (or not being aware of this evolutionary process) is a natural phenomenon of being subjects in the middle of evolving, but having intellects with the capacity to remember (Bergson), we can use hindsight to investigate a more open past. This then, is the intrinsic motivation for the first person narrative, to get to a better understanding of who we are now by excavating the past.  The extrinsic motivation comes from considering the reader, to shape this personal journey into a story that is meaningful for an audience, one that compels them to spend time reading.

Both the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for writing first person narrative explain the genre’s obsession with show-don’t-tell. It speaks back to the iconic Proustian moment of biting into a tea soaked madeleine, the sensory experience triggering untapped memory while communicating to readers the truth of the experience. As Mary Karr observes, “Strangely, readers “believe” what’s rendered with physical clarity.” In this way, the motivation for writing determines the craft strategies modeled and practiced in class, the “why” determining the “how” and the “what.” The lived experience of learning how to utilize the two vantage points with the help of craft techniques and revision in a workshop setting over the lifespan of the course is enough for the reflection process to unfold, to get students to new realizations about their relationship with a language. The happy side effect of living this writing process in English is that students grow closer to the language; it's no longer foreign but a personal means to make better sense of one's life and communicate it to a wider audience. In learning the craft of writing, students close the distance to writing too, finding it more approachable and meaningful. The agency and ownership gained with both language and writing is not merely authentic but natural. How can one consider a language and a craft that you used to hack into your own life as not yours?

In doing the literacy narrative for four consecutive semesters, the correlation between craft mastery and change in thinking is obvious. *(Do I need to show how obvious this is - craft mastery as related to change in thinking? Because this is a key criteria for grading, evidence can be easily provided.*)The possibilities for using writing craft as a means to translingual practice of writing is indeed exciting. By tracing closely key moves in student literacy narratives (*how many should I trace? Currently, I’m thinking of following the two I mention at the beginning*), I hope to unpack the translingual literacy narrative to show its pedagogical possibilities.

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* *How much literature review needed? For literacy narratives? For craft? For theory? To what extent?*

Key Works:

* Translingual theory

Horner, Bruce, Min-Zhan Lu, Jacqueline Jones Royster, and John Trimbur. “Language Difference in Writing: Toward a Translingual Approach.”

Donahue, Christiane, Bruce Horner, and Samantha NeCamp. “Toward a Multilingual Composition Scholarship: From English Only to a Translingual Norm.”

*The descriptions of monolingual beliefs and translingual practice are used as a lens to trace and delineate student practice and thinking as shown in their writing.*

* Theory

Bergson, Henri. *Creative Evolution*. Translated by Arthur Mitchell, 1911. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Birkerts, Sven. *The Art of Time in Memoir: Then, Again*. 2008

Newkirk, Thomas. *Minds Made for Stories*. 2014

*Newkirk not only* *makes the case for narrative as the default mode for thinking and writing, but unpacks the possibilities for classroom practice.*

*Bergson and Birkerts provide the theoretical framework for recasting writing in terms of time rather than spatial organization.*

* Model Text

Lahiri, Jhumpa. *In Other Words*. 2013

*The best literacy narrative I’ve come across; the inspiration for the assignment. Lahiri, Pulitzer Prize winning Benagli American writer, moves to Italy with her family to pursue her love of the Italian language; the book relates this journey, written in Italian, translated into English by Ann Goldstein, both versions presented side by side.*

* Writing Craft

Karr, Mary. *The Art of Memoir*. 2015

Kidder, Tracy and Richard Todd. *Good Prose: The Art of Nonfiction*. 2013.

Le Guin, Ursula K. *Steering the Craft: A 21st Century Guide to Sailing the Sea of Story.* 1998.

Murray, Donald. *Crafting a Life in Essay, Story, Poem*.1996

Rule, Rebecca and Susan Wheeler. *True Stories: Guides for Writing from Your Life*. 2000.

*These works, among many, are written by professional writers who delineate writing in terms of craft. Their definitions, descriptions, and exercises show what writing craft looks like.*

**Glossary**

(*These definitions are from Rule, Rebecca and Susan Wheeler. True Stories: Guides for Writing from Your Life. 2000. How familiar are they to you? What gives you difficulty? This will help me to figure out the nature of translation needed to bridge creative nonfiction and composition studies as I point out how these techniques are being used and to what effect in student examples.*)

**Be specific:** “Specifics are to the writer what hammer and nails are to the carpenter.” (Donald Murray) When you rely on facts and details, you write with authority. Avoid vagueness.

**Create an experience for your reader (appeal to the senses; sensory details):** Readers long to live other lives, understand how other people feel and think, act and react. They want you to create an experience for them on the page so they can be transported. One way to provide this is to show more than tell. Rely on the five senses so readers see, hear, touch, taste, and smell, just as you did at the time an important encounter took place. Most important: Readers must see.

**When to show and when to tell:** When you show, you render a moment specifically, sensuously, so readers see, touch, taste, hear, smell; so they feel they are in that moment. But to rely only on showing limits you and your subject. You tell when you have important information that will substantially enrich your reader’s appreciation of the event or person or idea on which you are focusing.