

Hidden Behind the Faces that You Love: Seeing Parents in a Different Light

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“The relationships between parents and their children are much more complicated than I originally thought. You think because you are a child or a parent that you would know all there is to know about the relationship; however, there are always those feelings that are hidden behind those faces that you love.”

--A student in the course

Perspectives on Parent-Child Relationships is a course that we had been wanting to teach for a long time. We hoped to provide students with more than information about parent-child relationships. Through immersing students in literature from different perspectives and about different kinds of parent-child relationships, we hoped to enable them to shift their point of view and come as close as possible to experiencing the relationship from a parent’s perspective. Our own experiences as parents had had profound effects on our lives. As Elizabeth Stone writes, “Making the decision to have a child—it’s momentous. It is to decide forever to have your heart

go walking around outside your body.” We wanted to explore with our students what it means to be a parent, what it means to be someone’s child, what it means to be involved in this relationship.

Obviously, we could not hope to achieve these goals in a didactic classroom format. This is not content which can be preprocessed, packaged for classroom consumption, and regurgitated on an exam. We planned a series of experiences, through readings (fiction, poetry and essays about the felt experience of parents), visits from panels of “real-life” parents, and representations of parents and children as seen in popular culture (such as television portrayals, advice books and advertising directed at children). We needed then to provide students with a way of processing the course material and integrating that with their own experiences as children and/or parents. The writing we asked students to do provided the crucial link between the course material and their lives.

Students wrote extensively for this course. We asked them to respond informally in journals to the readings that would be discussed in class. We also used the journals as a way of helping them prepare for and respond to class discussions and presentations. In addition, they wrote five more formal papers. Two of these were structured: one a narrative based on an interview with one or both of their parents or a parent figure; the other an account of a mealtime in their household. We left the choice of topic in the other three papers up to the students, although we required that each paper clearly connect to the course content and/or the readings. Before preparing a final copy of each paper, students reviewed drafts of each other’s papers in class and received feedback from each other and from us. Students then chose three of these revised papers to further revise for presentation in a final portfolio. In this final portfolio, they were also to include an introduction in which they explained how their work for the course had affected them as a son or daughter, as an actual or potential parent, as a writer/reader, and as a person. We also asked them to consider how their thinking about parent/child relationships had changed over the course of the semester and how the pieces they had selected illustrated those changes. (All the quotes

used in this paper, including the opening quote, were taken from the students' introductions.)

Throughout the semester, we had inklings that most of the students in the class had never done the kind of reading and writing we were asking them to do. In the introductions to their portfolios, they expressed this clearly and insightfully.

"I have not had the chance to write many papers other than lesson plans or position papers since I have left high school. High school was a long time ago, and I was glad to be given the chance to write creatively one last time before graduating."

"As for writing, we sure have had our share of writing in this class, but the writing was different from what I was used to. We weren't just researching and writing our findings, we were expressing our feelings and views on a matter. I started to really look at my life and how I could relate it to many of our readings."

This type of writing allowed them to find personal meaning in the course content. They were able to relate the content of the course to their own relationships with their parents and/or their children.

"The readings that we were to complete and reflect on painted vivid pictures in my mind of situations that different families go through. I was able to think about these stories and reflect on them in my journal. This journal created a better understanding of and feeling for the readings. It allowed me to relate the stories to my own life, and share those experiences with others."

"I feel that I have benefited most from the reflective

journal entries and the many pieces of writing I have completed this semester. When I put my thoughts down on paper, they become much clearer ... Writing about the relationships portrayed in the literature and then relating them to my own has been, in a way, a form of therapy. Writing about my relationships with my mother and father has required me to really delve into my childhood and adolescence in a way that I haven't before."

They began to find new meaning in their family lives. One student describes the process of deciding on a topic for her paper in this way:

"I must confess that for me this story happened as sort of an instantaneous combustion sort of thing. I had been wracking my brain for more than a week for an idea for my first paper. The night before the paper was due, I was curled up in my favorite chair, trying to write. I grew frustrated and had just tossed my pad of paper on the floor. I leaned my head back and closed my eyes. Several minutes later, I became aware of the night around me and of the sounds in the house. Suddenly, everything seemed so clear to me, so simple. I reached down for the paper and began to write. I knew then that it was not about finding something special to write about, but to write about something simple and ordinary. That through the ordinariness, something special was shared."

As the semester progressed, students began to appreciate how truly difficult it is to be a parent. Many students reported calling their parents to talk about one of the readings or to share something they'd written. Some students began to write from their parents' point of view, or to speculate about what their parents would have

said if they had been asked to speak to our class. “I could always imagine my parents up there talking about me,” one student wrote. “Every parent panel had a piece of my parents in it.” Students also began to think of relationships as situated in particular social and cultural contexts, and how that affects parenting decisions.

“While writing the journals, I found myself looking back on my own life. When we read the stories that dealt with parent/child relationships, I thought about my own relationships with my parents...There was a story that dealt with culture and how some things are so different. It made me think of my grandparents. They have different viewpoints than I have because they grew up in a different time at a different place. Reading these stories and poems helps you see that not everyone and everything is the same.”

“At school, my main role is to live and learn as a student at college. However, I soon realized that my role as a student is not the main issue of this class. I now had to view myself in a variety of roles...through all aspects of the course I was continually evaluating myself as a daughter and sister to my family. I particularly saw this self-analysis through my writings... I found myself seeing my role in my family in a new way. I began to realize what my parents have done to form the family that we have...Through the readings I got a sense of what other families experience and how they deal with their crises or problems...I have had an opportunity to hear, read, and see a variety of parents and families that have succeeded in their own individual way.”

“While writing these pieces I did quite a bit of what one might consider ‘soul-searching.’ I thought about

situations that I had long since decided never to refer to again due to pain. This led me to the rationalization of many feelings that I had never sorted through. I became the ‘outsider.’ I felt as though I was analyzing someone else’s feelings instead of my own.”

“As a daughter, this class has helped me to understand my mother and father’s point of view on issues such as boyfriends, growing up, and leaving for college. It has prompted many discussions and questions about my childhood adventures. I have shared several of the readings with my parents because they have reminded me of moments we have had together. This course has also made me more patient with my parents. I have found myself considering their feelings more often before I speak or act. It has helped me to realize that they are only human.”

Many students reported that they had been unprepared for the amount of reading and writing required for this course. It was challenging for the students to use writing as a way of creating personal meanings. By the end of the semester, they all expressed pride in what they had accomplished as writers.

“Through my journal entries, I think I have been able to speak more freely as a writer. I found myself taking the time to read the articles carefully and then formulating a response that conveyed their impression on me. I believe both my reading and writing skills have improved, as I have become more analytical in my ways of thinking and responding to situations.”

“As a writer, this class has been very challenging. I have never considered myself a good writer because I have never tried to write. I have enjoyed, and be-

come frustrated, by this aspect of the course. I have also been pleased with some of the final writings I have completed.”

“I have never taken a writing class because I didn’t think I was any good at it. I think that this class really impacted me by changing the way I feel about my writing. I had a chance to do some writing about a topic that is important and interesting to me. And the best part was that other people, including myself, enjoyed reading my stories...I am really excited about the pieces in my portfolio. I feel as if they are the most passionate pieces of writing I have ever done.”

At some point or another, all of the students in the class struggled with the ambiguity of the readings and the necessity of shifting perspectives. We began the semester by defining as a class what is meant by a “good parent” and a “good family.” The necessity of responding to the literature in journals continually challenged students to revise and extend these definitions. As one student wrote, “It has made me realize that there are no perfect families or no set standards as to what constitutes a family.”

Many students found it hard to think of their parents as real, flawed human beings, who struggled and made the best decisions that they could. Some found writing about their parents to be painful. One even said, “It is not easy to have to write about someone you love. It feels like I am talking behind her back.” Yet, through writing in response to different parents’ experiences, students gained deeper understandings of their own parents’ perspectives and a greater appreciation for the complexities of parent-child relationships.

“My parents and I have struggled through many battles. I have let them down and they still love me. I am not living the ideal life they would choose for me

but they still love me...Life is full of choices and adventures. Through these we grow as parents and as children. Together we learn to respect and cherish each other as people. I have gained a great appreciation for my parents in the last couple of months.”

The writing we asked students to do enabled them to reflect on many different kinds of family experience and use this lens to reconsider their own. By the end of the course, students seemed willing to give up their notion of the ideal, perfect family, and to embrace the infinitely richer and more complicated reality.