

Tutors' Column: "Students' Writing as Sacred Texts: Personal Narratives in the Writing Center"

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She sits next to me at the desk, chewing on her bottom lip, as I explain. “You kept a diary for six years, so obviously you like to write. Just because you don’t like grammar doesn’t mean you don’t like writing. Writing is about storytelling; it isn’t about grammar and mechanics.”

She shifts in her chair. The assignment we are working on is the literacy narrative for her first-year composition class, in which she is required to reflect on an experience that shaped her attitude toward reading or writing. She’s already admitted her feelings of inadequacy; her family is full of strong writers and she never quite measured up.

“So you can write about that,” I continue excitedly. “About how you learned to love writing, despite your struggles with mechanics and spelling.” Suddenly her eyes flood with tears. “But I *don’t!*” she sobs. “I *don’t like writing!*”

This story happened during my first week of tutoring in the writing center, and it left a lasting impression on me. I tried to push a specific interpretation on this student’s experience, although it was clearly not the interpretation that rang true to her. As tutors, we are in a position to strongly influence students’ writing, and never is that a more risky position to be in than when dealing with personal narratives. While all academic writing impacts writers, a critical essay is likely to affect only their attitude toward the issue at hand; a personal narrative, however, can affect writers’ entire concepts of themselves. We become the stories we tell ourselves, and once written down, these stories gain even more power through concreteness. Due to the stories’ likelihood to impact their sense of self, much is at stake when writing these papers. Yet the ethics of personal narrative tutoring receive little attention in writing center scholarship. With many first- and second-year composition courses, as well as numerous health, education, and

social science courses, including at least one personal narrative assignment, it is imperative that tutors understand how to help students make meaning of their lives, without encountering the pitfall I did and assigning the meaning themselves.

A good personal narrative is not just a description of events; it is “an individual’s thoughtful, unhurried reflection on certain experiences that seem to have an interesting significance” (Harris 939). When approached properly, personal narratives can help students develop a self-understanding that is “more important than . . . any set of procedural competencies” (Brooke 5). It is important for us as tutors to help students uncover what the “interesting significance” of their experience is, because only then will they truly benefit from the assignment and gain new self-understanding. But if tutors push their own interpretations, the narratives are less likely to be authentic, which nullifies the potential for increased self-awareness and personal empowerment. This danger is compounded by the tutor-student relationship, in which students often view tutors as the authorities and are more likely to take tutors at their word. To avoid this danger, we must reevaluate the way we approach personal narratives.

Equality-based discussion, discussion between two peers searching for answers together, rather than between an instructor doling out answers to a student, is one of the best ways we can encourage and validate students’ own interpretations. Much of writing center pedagogy emphasizes shifting from a dialogue of instruction to a dialogue of conversation, and nowhere is this more important than with personal narratives. Jennifer Sinor, a creative non-fiction professor at my university, told me that when she helps students write personal narratives, she spends 90 percent of the time on conversation, exploring the topic verbally, and only 10 percent on actually outlining a structure. “We talk our way to our writing, and we write our way to our thinking,” she said. Whether a student is in the brainstorming phase or has written a draft and is revising, equality-based discussion is key to reaching deeper levels of meaning in personal narratives. As tutors, our job is to ask questions and to actively listen to student responses, all the while letting the students talk more than we do.

Our role should be to help students figure out what they are trying to say—not what we think they *should* say—and to offer suggestions in a spirit of conversation. Sometimes we get so excited about a possible interpretation that we get carried away with it and forget to listen, as I did in the personal narrative

session described earlier. One way to avoid this tendency is to list (together with the student) as many different interpretations as possible, thereby demonstrating that there are always multiple ways of looking at a story, and allowing students to focus on whichever reading feels more true to them. While we draft these lists, it is important for tutors to respect the students; only with respect will we be able to hear what they are saying and hone in on the meaning behind the words. We may be the authorities on writing, but they are the authorities on their lives—this is the time to pass the baton to them.

The time limits of a typical tutoring session restrict the tutor's ability to engage in a conversation. With 20-, 25-, or even 60-minute sessions, we feel enormous (often self-imposed) pressure to achieve results and to have students walk out the door having made visible, tangible progress. We want to feel that we are doing our job, and nothing gives us that satisfaction more than linear advancement from point A to point B, preferably in the form of a written outline or the draft of an introduction. This efficiency-driven mindset, however, can be crippling to personal narratives, which require "long thinking,.... reflection, the courage to dive below the surface, the willingness to live with a topic for a long period of time, turn it over and over in your mind, and decide for yourself what questions to ask about it" (Spandel 5). Allowing students a few minutes to freewrite is a good way to encourage such slowed, reflective thinking. Also, letting go of conventional attitudes towards efficiency is crucial. It is okay to spend the entire session in discussion so that the student leaves with two or three possible interpretations in mind. The longer they live with the topic, the more likely they will reach some significant insight regarding it. Of course, due dates for assignments sometimes make such leisurely reflection impossible, but when the pace of the session can be slowed down, it should be.

Even after sessions are slowed down, "significant insights" can sometimes be hard to come by. When asked about the significance behind a personal experience, students will often fall back on surface-level interpretation, and because of the time limits we face as tutors, it can be tempting to accept this from them. However, we should try to push them further, past the easy answer. For example, I once tutored a student who was writing a personal narrative about his experiences as a member of a local hiking club. When I asked what he had taken from his experiences, he replied tentatively, "Uh, that the journey is more important than the destination?" He easily could have drafted

an essay focused on this idea, but instead, I encouraged him to think more critically about the subject. Together, we identified several possible areas of focus and discussed which one felt most authentic to him and which would be most enjoyable to write about. This strategy required that I stay focused on asking questions rather than giving answers, and that I listened honestly to the student's replies. In other words, I had to resist the urge to distort his answers to fit my vision for the essay. We ended up discussing his complex relationship with nature, and he left the center with (I hope) something meaningful to think about. If a student seems fixated on the-moral-of-the-story thinking, try explaining that the meaning of the paper doesn't have to be neat and tidy. It can be complex, nuanced, and elusive. It just has to be sincere.

Ultimately, there is no failsafe method, no "Top Ten Tips for Tutoring Personal Narrative Writers." Rather, we need to cultivate an awareness of the issue and develop a "sincere interest in students' lives and their opinions" (Spandel 21). As Sinor put it, we should treat students' writing as "sacred texts." It is a privilege to be admitted into students' lives. By keeping that in mind, we can help them gain valuable insights into their pasts and develop skills of analysis and self-expression that will serve them well into their futures.



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