

Fostering Reflection and Empathy: Narratives as Pedagogical Tools in Writing Consultation Preparation

Jeffrey G. Howard
Converse University

Many of us are not necessarily conscious of the extent to which our experiences with literacy impact us. However, if we are paying attention, we see evidence of their cumulative impact. Because of the nature of writing center work, I argue that writing center staff members should 1) attend to the experiences that have shaped their own literacies and 2) learn to articulate the ways in which those experiences inform their pedagogical approaches and relationships to clients and their learning. That is, through constructing meaning from our own often difficult acquisition of literacies, we situate ourselves to more effectively serve those who frequent our centers. In this article, I suggest that literacy narratives, which J. Blake Scott defines as “a history or account of a person’s development or accumulation of literacy” (109), are a powerful method for helping our consultants accomplish the intellectual work of attending to and articulating their experiences. In addition, literacy narratives can help consultants become more reflective about their approaches to writing center work and develop empathy that “builds trust,” “motivate[s] learning,” and extends their ability to “cultivate the understanding, connection, and agency writers—and tutors—need to grow” (Lape 6). This article focuses specifically on the manner in which writing center directors, by having writing center staff members write literacy narratives, can promote impactful reflective practice and empathy in their staff.



JEFFREY G. HOWARD

LITERACY NARRATIVES

Literacy narratives are frequently written—although they can be multimodal and multimedia—autobiographical compositions detailing experiences of the author’s life that pertain to their development as a reader, writer, designer, and other areas of literacy. Literacy narratives are highly individualized and variable, potentially reflecting on anything from listening to someone read from a favorite children’s book to overcoming the fear of public

speaking. In the process of reflecting on such experiences, authors ideally raise their own consciousness about the influence and impact of such experiences on the present, while also constructing meaning through form, syntax, image, and metaphor. In addition to their use in English composition courses, literacy narratives frequently appear in curricula that prepare future educators for careers in K-12 instruction because they “help teachers to look critically at their knowledge and the places/locations where that knowledge was constructed.” In the process, literacy narratives aid in the learning and growth of writers/teachers as they “craft” or “construct” meaning with the raw material of personal experience (Clark and Medina 68).

THE NARWOL PROJECT

In 2019, our writing center, the Naugle CommLab, launched the NARWOL (Narratives of Reading, Writing, and Other Literacies archive), a public-facing online repository of 1000-1500-word literacy narratives composed by our staff members. Like traditional literacy narratives, these compositions help staff members reflect on and construct meaning from their literacy experiences with the additional expectation that writers will also connect those experiences in some way to writing center work. The intent is to help them discover and draw specific conclusions about how their own experiences have transformed into tools and skills they deploy in writing center consultations, and thus inform their approach, methods, or overarching philosophy of tutoring.

Staff members need only compose one literacy narrative during the time they work in our center, and they set their own deadlines for completing it, so some of them may finish in a month, while others take up to 1-2 years of intermittent writing and revising. Most of our consultants have never written a literacy narrative before (only one consultant has ever claimed to have composed one), so to support their foray into this genre, I provide our staff members with prompting questions and instructions on how to begin drafting their narratives, including definitions of both “literacy” and “literacy narrative,” the conventions of autobiographical writing, and potential topics. To begin these conversations, I ask my consultants about favorite books, events that made them like writing or reading, or influential people (family members, friends, teachers, etc. who have been a part of their literacy journey). Starting with a single focus the writer deems important or a collection of experiences, I invite them to freewrite and then draft, encouraging them to

share their work with me once it starts coming together so we can talk about organization, the “So what?,” or other considerations. I also recommend they use archived narratives as models or inspiration (found online in the NARWOL archive for their own writing), because reading those narratives can help writers decide what they do or do not want to write about. Once they discover their main ideas, they write about experiences that range from early childhood to the present day; the topics (including music, performance, literature, and biology) can vary. For example, Sol Pea wrote about telling stories and translating for their Spanish-speaking Abuela, who “came to the United States seeking asylum in the wake of the El Salvadoran civil war” but “spoke little English,” while Jae Pujols’s narrative focuses on their love of the Harry Potter series, the often- fraught relationship between texts and authorship, and the author’s trans identity. Ultimately, whatever our staff members choose to write about is generally located, implicitly or explicitly, within the literacy mission, purpose, and practices of the writing center.

Because I consider the literacy narrative project part of staff professionalization and training, staff members receive time on the schedule to write their narratives, so whenever they are on shift but do not have appointments, they can use that time to write or meet with other writing center consultants or me to discuss their drafts. When they meet with me, I try to provide validation, praise, and other feedback intended to help the writer emphasize emerging themes and through lines; finetune concrete descriptions; and discover, articulate, and situate the significance of their story in relation to their work in the center. By engaging in this process with me and their writing center community, our staff members put themselves in a position to practice critical self-reflection and heighten their empathy.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Wherever it takes place, whether in a classroom or a writing center, reflection impacts learning. Indeed, Renata Fitzpatrick et al. state, “As we work collaboratively with students to facilitate their development as writers, our task is, like teaching, full of moments about which reflection can be useful” (2). Ben Rafoth too has written about the ways reflection improves writing center practice. He references John Dewey’s definition of reflection, namely “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge” that deliberately grounds that belief in “evidence and rationality” (qtd. in Rafoth 8). According to Rafoth, reflection should connect “decisions and

actions in teaching or tutoring with the larger effort to create a better world," thus [expanding] the possibilities for helping students" (10). Importantly, reflection prompts re-evaluation of assumptions and strategies, and consultants and administrators who frequently re-evaluate themselves are likely more open to modifying approaches and habits to suit diverse situations and learners. They argue that critical reflection is essential to training peer consultants because it allows consultants to identify and understand the perspectives and experiences they bring to the session and how those can impact their work with students (43). At the same time, Okawa et al. place the responsibility for promoting reflection in writing center work squarely on administrators' shoulders.

In our center, literacy narratives are one means by which we foster a culture of critical reflection. For example, one consultant connected their lifelong love for reading with their current efforts to learn how to better explain "grammar and language issues without being prescriptive but while still giving useful information and context" ("Words...and Words...and Words"). Referring to the preparation of K-12 educators, Cheryl H. Almeda calls literacy narratives a "vehicle for reflection" (31). We have found that literacy narratives provide our writing center consultants with opportunities for meaningful reflection that, to borrow a concept from Julie Lindquist and Bump Halbritter, are "informed" by the framework of writing center theory and genre conventions and "scaffolded" by meeting with me or fellow consultants to discuss their experiences and processes within the context of the project and the conventions of the literacy narrative (416). Consequently, this reflection helps consultants take their writing center practice to another level.

Because everyone in our center is involved in this initiative of reflection, the project creates opportunities for each of us to make reflective practice more central to our writing center environment and culture. For example, in a presentation at SWCA 2021, Emily Nguyen discussed how the reflective aspect of the literacy narrative "helps consultants...understand where they come from and how it influences who they are today." Her narrative prompted her to think about her identity as both reader and writer and the evolution of that identity. Emily went from the second-grader and eventual Accelerated Reading Champion whose dad, in

her words, decided that Emily was never “going to be a math protegee” to the high school student who “lost time and motivation to write and read for pleasure” while remaining a “stickler for grammar and mechanics.” Eventually, Emily became a business major who works in a writing center and loves “talking to people earnestly and expressing interest in what they have to say” (“NGUY 6262”). It encouraged her to think critically about her classmates, many of whom:

do not love reading and writing nearly as much as I do. Despite this, even people who dislike writing choose to come to the [writing center] because they want to get better, and that’s what’s important. We accept people whether they are lovers or haters of writing, and we work with them to improve their communication skills. (“The Literacy Narrative”)

On the same panel, Rocio Soto shared how composing the literacy narrative led her to discover new ideas about writing center work and, importantly, about herself:

As a result of this project, I’ve discovered I am an eager sharer. Someone who looks to share the wonders of literacy and all the joy they can bring.... This job is something I love to do, not because I am naturally gifted at it or have been working in communication since the beginning of time, but because I am passionate about the journey and how we choose to share that with our students.

These are just two of many discoveries our consultants have made while composing their narratives and reflecting on the impact their experiences have had on their work.

EMPATHY

In general, writing center work attracts empathetic individuals who want to use what they know to help others learn. Their empathy can be activated or cultivated through reading and daily interactions with student writers. Composing literacy narratives, as well, can cultivate consultant empathy. Clients want to work in a safe environment free of judgment and to receive feedback that responds to the client’s specific situation. What writing center administrators generally want and seek to cultivate is a staff of communication specialists trained in what Noreen Lape calls “a pedagogy of empathy” to help students respond to the situation in which and for which they are composing (1). If empathy, as Lape suggests, is “a teachable tutoring skill,” administrators can foster the empathy that many consultants

already possess. For example, consultants can develop their “pedagogy of empathy” through receiving ample opportunities to meet with diverse clients of many backgrounds, identities, and degrees of communicative competence. Likewise, the reflections stemming from our staff members’ literacy narratives indicate that these compositions can also be useful for developing a “pedagogy of empathy.”

By reflecting on their experiences and struggles with expressive and receptive communication in their literacy narratives, our empathetic consultants consider how they have to deal with these challenges. For example, Nguyen writes about how her weaknesses with oral communication led her to become a more adept listener, which helps her greatly in consultations:

I’ve never been a strong speaker, choosing instead to sit on the sidelines and listen to the conversation or ditch my surroundings in favor of fantasy worlds. But I’ve learned that talking to people earnestly and expressing interest in what they have to say can bring out the best stories. And when that magic moment happens, I love to listen. (“NGUY 6262”)

Cassidy Reese also writes about listening by drawing on her experiences with performance and drama in high school. She writes that her high aptitude with oral communication proved a barrier to developing as an active listener. The literacy narrative led her to key insights on the importance of listening and the power of silence in consultations:

In the context of literacy in speech, tutoring requires just as much listening as it does actually talking.... As a performer, there is just as much (and sometimes more) power in the pauses between lines of dialogue or right after the climax of a song as there is in the words or notes themselves. The pauses are the moments when you can see a character at their most vulnerable, taking the moment to process and grow internally before your very eyes.

Examining the claims made in these narratives, I would argue that composing literacy narratives helps our consultants turn inward toward their weaknesses, struggles, and vulnerabilities, which ultimately can season their attitudes and behaviors in their consultations and help them connect their own literacy development with the challenges their clients face.

Further, by composing these narratives, consultants can develop a greater understanding of the relationship between empathy and literacy and ways in which that relationship plays out in work. In her literacy narrative, Sophia Tone wrote, "Compassion, not perfection, is the true destination of literacy." In other words, growing as a communicator (like being a consultant) is less about linguistic rules and more about human connection. Sophia's comment, and the pedagogy of empathy it implies, applies particularly well to our work with multilingual clients. While sessions with multilingual clients can present additional layers of linguistic and cultural complexity that our consultants learn to navigate, it is also important to recall that outside of the center multilingual clients frequently face abundant prejudice, both explicit and implicit. For our multilingual clients, who may make up 25%–35% of consultations, the empathy that consultants like Tone possess contributes to an environment in which multilingual clients can learn, grow, and succeed. Multilingual students need empathetic individuals like Peña who wrote about helping their Spanish-speaking Abuela (Abby) prepare for her U.S. citizenship exam, which was entirely in English:

The skills my Abby unknowingly imparted to me have made me cherish my experiences at [our writing center]. Some of my most memorable appointments have been with international students. I will never forget the student from South Korea with whom I spent our appointment analyzing the intricacies of American humor through memes or the international PhD student who met with me to practice for their Three Minute Thesis competition and ended up winning the competition.

Empathetic consultants can transform the writing center into a refuge for multilingual clients who often cannot find the academic and emotional support they require elsewhere. I would argue that the pedagogy of empathy promoted by literacy narratives is a highly effective tool in helping our consultants cultivate that space.

CONCLUSION

Each writing center consultant possesses a unique set of literacy experiences that contribute to who they are, what they do, and why they do it. By using narrative to harness the power of these experiences, we prepare consultants to be more

reflective about their work and cultivate their empathy. If writing centers are to continue playing a key role in “the larger effort to create a better world” (Rafoth 10), then self-reflection that leads to change and increased awareness that allows each of us to foster more meaningful connections with our clients will be crucial in helping us achieve the impact we wish to have and see in our academic communities.



WORKS CITED

- Anonymous. “Words...and Words...and Words.” *NARWOL*, <https://narwol.lmc.gatech.edu/161-2/>. Accessed 4 Sept. 2021.
- Almeda, Cheryl Henderson. “Composing Ourselves: Utilizing Literacy Narratives to Promote Knowledge and Reflection in Preservice Secondary English Teachers.” Dissertations, Western Michigan University, 2010, <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/dissertations/493>. Accessed 9 Mar. 2021.
- Clark, Caroline, and Carmen Medina. “How Reading and Writing Literacy Narratives Affect Preservice Teachers’ Understandings of Literacy, Pedagogy, and Multiculturalism.” *Journal of Teacher Education*, vol. 51, no. 1, Jan. 2000, pp. 63–76, doi:10.1177/002248710005100107. Accessed 9 Mar. 2021.
- Fitzpatrick, Renata, et al. “A Reflection on Reflective Writing Center Work.” *WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship*, vol. 41, no. 3–4, 2016, pp. 2–9.
- Lape, Noreen. “Training Tutors in Emotional Intelligence: Toward a Pedagogy of Empathy.” *Writing Lab Newsletter*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2008, pp. 1–6.
- Lindquist, Julie, and Bump Halbritter. “Documenting and Discovering Learning: Reimagining the Work of the Literacy Narrative.” *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 70, no. 3, 2019, pp. 413–45.
- Nguyen, Emily. “NGUY 6262.” *NARWOL*, <https://narwol.lmc.gatech.edu/emily-nguyen/>. Accessed 9 Mar. 2021.
- . “The Literacy Narrative as a Tool for Reflective Practice.” *Southeastern Writing Center Association Virtual Conference*, 11 Feb. 2021. Panel.
- Okawa, Gail Y., et al. “Multi-cultural Voices: Peer Tutoring and Critical Reflection in the Writing Center.” *The Writing Center Journal*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2010, pp. 39–64.
- Peña, Sol. “Falling into Place.” *NARWOL*, <https://narwol.lmc.gatech.edu/solpena/>. Accessed 03 Jan. 2023.