

Teaching Tip: Literacy Autobiography

Stephen Cicirelli

Lecturer in Composition, Department of English

The first essay assignment I give in all of my Composition classes is a narrative essay. If there is anything that students love more than telling stories, it is telling stories about themselves. In the classroom, narratives also have the added benefit of requiring very little explanation (I almost never provide a typed-up prompt when assigning a narrative); Saint Peter's students are instinctive storytellers.

Usually I assign my students a narrative that is based on the in-class writing completed on the first day of class. Last year, for example, my Composition students wrote, in class, about why cigarette smoking, despite all the scientific research about its adverse effects, is still so attractive to young people. The narrative assignment I gave them, in conjunction with the in-class writing, was to tell me a story about a time they either quit something or were unable to quit something. The results, narratively speaking, were good. But the students all tended to write about the same things: breakups, near-breakups, and television shows they were "addicted" to. Also, I found that my main objective in giving this assignment—getting to know my students better—was not being achieved.

Culture, I thought, was a better way to learn about them. This semester, on the second day of class, we discussed what it means to be "literate"—the many definitions of literacy. Language, of course, steered the conversation toward culture. I asked the students if there were any other languages, besides English, in which they were literate. Many claimed literacy in at least one other language. "But how do we know," I asked them, "when we have become literate in a language?" My question was met initially with silence. Then, after some guidance, the students decided that things like creativity, metaphor, and mood (and other literary terms that typically are not introduced until their literature courses) were each hallmarks of literacy. I asked one more follow-up question: "How do we *become* literate?" This was a much easier question for them to answer because, I think, *becoming* literate always involves a story—a student's own personal story: What, if any, books were read to them as children? Did they keep journals? Which teachers inspired or discouraged them? Did literacy in one language prevent them from achieving literacy in another language?

At the end of class, I assigned what I called their Literacy Autobiography. I told them that I wanted to know the stories of how they became literate. The instructions I gave them, adapted from Southern Polytechnic State University, were as follows: "Describe either 1) a single important event in your literacy history or 2) a more complete literacy history." I emphasized that a Literacy Autobiography did not have to be a story "with a happy ending." For some, I said, the path to literacy has been full of failure and frustration, and that is okay. I did not want the students to feel that they had to kowtow to me because I was their Composition professor; if they

hated reading and/or writing, I wanted to know that. The object of the Literacy Autobiography is to learn how a student's history with reading and writing has come to shape his or her ideas about them in the present.

The results of this assignment far exceeded those of other narratives I have assigned. With the Literacy Autobiography, students are able to discuss their histories and cultures compassionately and critically. The assignment highlights something educators have always known: that is, how well students do, in class, is related in large part to how they perceive themselves. Making students better writers begins, and ought to begin, with a change of perspective.