

Narratives of Disclosure: Reconsidering the Ethics of Personal Writing Assignments in Composition Pedagogy for Neurodiverse and Marginalized Students

**Alisha Scott
Virginia Tech**

Instructors in the college composition classroom often require personal writing assignments, such as the literacy narrative, which can place pressure on students to reveal private life details. In the case of marginalized students, such an assignment may involve writing about traumatic or difficult experiences that students may not be ready to relive or may feel uncomfortable disclosing to others. For neurodiverse students, the literacy narrative can prompt disclosure of disabilities that students may not wish to otherwise reveal to instructors or peers. Ethical issues surrounding the literacy narrative assignment are explored and suggestions for pedagogical changes are proposed.

INTRODUCTION

The field of composition often requires personal writing on the part of university students in order to complete certain required assignments. The Literacy Narrative (LN) is one common genre of first-year writing in which students are asked to write about their personal experiences related to literacy. For some highly privileged students, this may involve recounting mainly positive memories of reading and writing throughout their lives. For more marginalized students, such an assignment may involve writing about traumatic and deeply difficult experiences that they may not be ready to relive or may feel uncomfortable disclosing to others, especially an authority figure such as an instructor, for a grade. In the case of neurodiverse students, the college classroom can already be a difficult place where they do not feel welcomed and their differences are often viewed negatively, as something which they must work harder to compensate for and strive to overcome.

In order to understand some of the ethical issues surrounding the assignment of personal writing in the composition classroom, it is crucial to learn from Disability Studies scholars within the field of rhetoric and composition. A foundational belief in Disability Studies (DS) places importance on paying attention to the effects of language use in order to view minds and bodies as inherently diverse in ways that should be celebrated rather than seeing divergence from cognitive, behavioral, and affective norms as deviant (Lewiecki-Wilson and Brueggemann, eds., 2008). This perspective is due to the long history of viewing disability as something which automatically requires accommodations and work to achieve a more normalized way of being (Wood et al., 2014). DS scholars aim to disrupt the binary designation of “able” or “disabled,” and to instead focus on the fluid and socially constructed aspects of disability rather than the medical-model view of disability as a fixed deficiency (Browning, 2014). In a largely ableist world, it is important to study the ways that people with disabilities self-disclose them, to open up a larger conversation on how disabilities are defined and constructed by individuals and how this in turn shapes their experiences.

There is a growing body of research within DS on personal essay writing in the composition classroom, specifically regarding the ways that rhetorics of “overcoming” function within discourse (Wood, 2014; Weigel & Miller, 2011; Browning, 2014; Kerschbaum, 2014). Firstly, in order to understand what rhetorics of “overcoming” entail, it is important to define and describe the concept. Browning touches on one definition of rhetorics of “overcoming” found in personal narrative writing and explains the ableist norms that underpin the concept:

“Overcoming narratives often further the notion that if a person has a disability he or she cannot live a full and fulfilling life. Overcoming narratives support the belief that the only way for a person with a disability to be happy is to ‘overcome’ or ‘triumph over’ his or her disability in some way” (Browning, 2014).

“Overcoming” rhetorics are further unpacked in scholarship by Bekah Hawrot Weigel and Lisa Detweiler Miller, who highlight how the overriding social expectation, when it comes to disability, involves writing narratives of overcoming because cognitive differences remain unseen and therefore, others have trouble understanding them without an easy, linear story with an uplifting resolve (2011). What Weigel and Miller point out here is the ableist social norm that stories told about disability are easier for readers to digest when they are told in the form of triumphs over hardships, rather than adjusting and continually re-adjusting to the psychological, social, or physical differences of life with a disability. Furthermore, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson explains that there is a social expectation that living with any sort of disability is unbearable, and therefore must be cured (2011). Garland-Thomson describes how widespread this is, since this “ideology of cure is not isolated in medical texts or charity campaigns, but in fact permeates the entire cultural conversation about disability and illness” (2011). Ella R. Browning also points out how throughout history, disability is persistently represented as being something that requires able-bodied assistance in order to cure and rid the disabled person of suffering (2014). Browning points out the differences in the ways DS views disability, appreciating neurodiversity as a valid way of being in a world with a spectrum of cognitive, behavioral, and physical differences (2014).

DS scholarship seeks to closely examine this cultural conversation on various fronts and to question the language and discourses surrounding disabilities. Stephanie L. Kerschbaum sets the stage for the importance of this vein of scholarship as she explains that it is difficult to articulate differences, whether it is someone on the outside describing another person or for the individual themselves, and yet differences dictate much of our lives and the ways we interact and move about the world (2014b). The study of rhetorical representations of individuals’ disabilities through self-disclosures can lend insight into how individuals are conceiving of themselves in an ableist world, opening up a larger conversation on how power structures and social norms affect people with disabilities. Though there is always an inherent insufficiency in language, analyzing the discourse surrounding disability disclosures can give further insight into how students are conceptualizing and representing their disabilities in LNs. How students write about their disabilities can become part of a larger cultural conversation on how disability disclosures are affected by such power structures (meaning structures of power such as government agencies, social institutions, higher education institutions) that define what it means to have a disability and affect how individuals with disabilities communicate and move about in the world. Furthermore, Kerschbaum explains how narratives allow people to create their senses of self and determine social structures and interactions in classrooms (2014b). Therefore, it is important for DS scholars in composition to examine the ways that students construct/conceive of and challenge notions of disability in their writing, and to question how composition pedagogy sponsors certain disclosures or narrative structures in student personal writing assignments like the LN.

LITERACY NARRATIVES IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

Though DS scholars find a variety of problematic aspects in personal writing assignments, the LN remains prevalent today in composition classroom pedagogy in part due to its easy integration with modern

composition theories and pedagogical leanings, as the LN pedagogically requires students to examine past experiences and apply them to discover how literacy shapes their ways of existing in the world and society, which is one of the foundational aspects of composition as a field (Comer and Harker, 2015). This points out the importance of the LN as an assignment, and opens it up as a valid resource to study within composition scholarship.

Furthermore, Kathryn B. Comer and Micheal Harker (2015) provided an overview of the most common reasons cited by instructors of composition for utilizing the LN assignment in their courses, which include students': use of "self-reflection and [increase in] confidence"; developing a "critical perspective"; engaging in "identity construction"; and "community building." Similarly, Julie Lindquist and Bump Halbritter (2019) described their findings from a meta-analysis of LN studies and detailed the range of reasons they are assigned, from the LN's ability to help high school students learn college-level writing skills, to the LN's potential to allow students to develop future goals in their education (2019). Both Comer and Harker (2015), as well as Lindquist and Halbritter (2019), brought up additional benefits of the LN assignment for instructors themselves, describing how the LN provides information that can be used to improve the way they teach each individual student as the composition course progresses. Comer and Harker explain this as the potential for LNs to learn more about their students' needs in the classroom through gaining insight into students' experiences with and attitudes about literacy (2015). Similarly, Lindquist and Halbritter describe LNs as a useful tool to "diagnose students' learning needs" (2019). For all the above reasons, the LN continues to be a common composition classroom assignment that carries inherent values important to student learning in the composition classroom, and the LN's persistence as a common assignment creates valid justification for composition scholars to continue to study student LNs.

STUDENT DISCLOSURES IN LITERACY NARRATIVES

Student personal writing has been well-examined for the ways that students self-disclose personal details. Back in 1995(a), Marilyn J. Valentino spoke out on the issue of dealing with troubling student disclosures of trauma or signs of mental illness that come up in student-produced texts in the composition classroom. Yet Valentino argued that personal writing is not the only catalyst for triggering traumatic responses in students; she maintained that even when composition instructors do not assign personal writing in the composition classroom, any type of assigned reading and responsive writing can provoke disclosures of past difficulties (1995a).

However, disability disclosures arise, DS scholars maintain that they are frequently met with ableist responses, which could shape the way that students write about disabilities in LN assignments for the classroom peer/instructor audience. Kerschbaum explains the unfortunate fact that disclosures of disabilities frequently provoke negative reactions and major changes in the ways that individuals are treated, and therefore, the rhetorical act of disclosure is highly significant (2014a). This leads to the idea that student disclosures of disability through writing should be treated with considerate respect and studying such disclosures from a DS lens can be helpful to understand the ways that students disclose disability and the types of rhetorical moves that students use in their discourse.

It should be noted that some scholars take the hard stance that all personal writing assignments (typically unintentionally) prompt students to write about disability when they may not want to do so otherwise. Tara K. Wood, for example, cautions fully against assigning personal narratives because of the ways that these assignments frequently promote rhetorics of "overcoming." Wood contends that personal narratives compel students to represent hardships in discourse through the lens of ableist notions of disability and a cure-seeking attitude (2014). For instance, one common form of overcoming rhetoric that Wood came across in studying student narrative writing was that students often represented traumatic events or disabilities in writing as beneficial factors that spurred growth (2014). Wood explains that when students produce "overcoming" rhetoric, this may trigger a response where they compare themselves to an idealized normal/able minded and bodied person, which can trigger past trauma (2014). Additionally, Wood further details the consistency with which she has read "overcoming" rhetorics in students' written discourse throughout her experience teaching composition, and notes that students typically write a story

arc which leads to a learning moment or “therapeutic resolve” (2014). Additionally, Eliza Chandler’s scholarship on narrative theory discusses how people with disabilities are inherently entangled in the social view that they are abnormal and should seek to cure themselves (2017). However, Chandler also suggests that stories that detail experiences with disability remain valuable because stories of living with disabilities should be attended to and listened to in order to push forward the cause of disability rights (2017). Thus, there is a case to be made for how personal writing prompts disclosures of disabilities, and also a case to be made for how students can benefit from being given space to write about disability, lest they are silenced, and disability justice will become stilted due to voices being silenced.

As a whole, the LN as a genre is one marked by stories of becoming—the production of discourse that represents life moments which changed students’ ideas about, and expressions of, literacy. Yet for students with disabilities, there is the potential to veer from stories of becoming literate and fall into the dominant ableist social view that they must “overcome” their disability in order to reach a more “able”-bodied/minded way of living in the world. There is also the potential for subversion of ableist tropes and many other patterns that can emerge through critical discourse analysis of a sampling of LNs. This leads to the need to continue DS scholarship to examine the rhetorical moves through which students disclose disability in LNs, so that disability justice can gain insight into the ways in which students disclose disability. This can then be compared to larger cultural conversations about disability, and the power structures that define disability, which often dictate how those with disabilities should move about the world.

OPT PEDAGOGY: THINKING WITH AND BEYOND TRIGGER WARNINGS

It is important to allow students the freedom to choose what they wish to write about in personal writing so that they may decide for themselves whether or not they wish to disclose certain personal life details to their instructors, and perhaps even their peers as well. Yet, even if a student is allowed free-reign to choose a topic of a paper themselves, we must understand as educators that at any point, any topic can become triggering and cause the reliving of trauma. Therefore, I argue that to assign students to write long-term, topic-based essay projects needs to come with an ethically-informed understanding on the part of the instructor that changing course is not necessarily correlated to “giving up” or “quitting,” but may in fact be a way for the student to avoid harm and invest themselves more fully in a safer topic. However, to change topics during the course of a long-term writing project requires more than just letting students know that it’s an option. It requires the instructor to be willing to help the student find new resources, to step in and assist them as they catch up to the point where the other students who stuck with their topics have reached. Conferences where the instructor helps the student compile a new reading list by offering suggestions may help, and it requires effort on the part of teachers to safeguard their students’ mental well-being. If IRB requires that human subject participants be allowed to opt out of research at any point, shouldn’t our pedagogy demonstrate some flexibility if students wish to stop exploring a triggering topic? I argue that composition instructors should consider what I term *Opt Pedagogy*, where students are free to opt-out of topics for writing projects without penalty if any topic becomes emotionally or psychologically harmful for them. Then, instructors can step in and work with a student as they opt-in to another topic; instructors should assist the student as they gather new resources and catch up. Some may at first be skeptical that this practice could be taken advantage of by a student to avoid continuing work on a topic that is taking more effort than they wish to expend. To that line of objection, I offer the counterargument that it would be a stretch to believe that students attempting to slack would be the ones more willing to restart a project from the beginning and work even more to complete it on time still. I believe that composition instructors owe it to their students to trust that if students report that a topic has become too triggering for them to keep working on, they are making this decision to avoid further harm. The concept of Opt Pedagogy is one way we can attempt to help our neurodiverse and other marginalized students to learn in safer, more positive ways.

A STUDENT'S RIGHT TO SILENCE

When students write about life-changing moments that shaped their literacy experiences, it isn't far-fetched to see how many of these may include difficult memories, especially for neurodiverse and marginalized students. Even if we assume that certain students truly did want to disclose difficult memories and found healing through the process of writing this assignment, not all students may feel that way. I propose that there are ways to sponsor the same learning goals that underpin the literacy narrative genre through assignments that give the option to avoid potentially psychologically harmful topics for students who may not wish to disclose their own hardships and private experiences. Instructors might, for instance, design an interview-based assignment where students can find willing participants, write reflections, and learn about the complexities of literacy in that way. Or, instructors could create an assignment that provides a list of excerpts from memoirs or let students bring in an outside memoir they choose in order to write an essay that explores the development of literacy for that author.

I suggest that instructors in the field of composition should honor what I have come to think of as a *student's right to silence*. If we can agree that, as composition instructors, we would certainly never uncomfortably invade a student's physical space in the classroom, I argue that we also have an ethical duty to refrain from invading students' inner mental spaces in ways that may feel uncomfortably close through adopting the mindset that students have an inherent right to silence when it comes to their past life experiences and personal relationships. Personal narrative writing need not be entirely eliminated from composition curriculum, as some students may wish to write them and find the process fulfilling. However, I urge the field of composition to take up these difficult ethical considerations surrounding what assignments like the LN may unintentionally sponsor in terms of disclosure, so that we may safeguard our students' emotional and mental safety in the same way we ensure they do not come to any physical harm due to work we assign them.

CONCLUSION

I call upon composition instructors to openly discuss the “express[ion of] concern regarding an absence of ethical responsibility and adequate attention to personal writing in the composition classroom, arguing that genres of self-revelation are treated too casually by instructors” (2011). I contend that instructors' stay-the-course mentality of long-term writing projects risks becoming a veiled sponsorship of ableism. Marilyn J. Valentino notes in her writing on veterans in the college classroom that options and flexibility in composition pedagogy give room for veterans to choose whether or not they wish to write about military experiences (2012b). In the same vein, I suggest that composition instructors adopt what I term *opt pedagogy*, a flexible allowance that lets students opt-out of triggering topics to opt-in to more comfortable topics. This comes along with a willingness for instructors to actively assist those *opt* students as they catch up again so that they are not penalized for their decision and have an equal chance to succeed as compared to students who remain with one topic long-term. Such a pedagogical strategy could help neurodiverse and other marginalized students to realize they don't have to write about overcoming disability, hardships, and trauma.

The LN assignment can be a helpful tool that many students enjoy and report as beneficial overall—but what about those students who may feel forced to reveal disability or disclose abuse or systemic oppression because those experiences have been part of their literacy journeys? Flexibility on literacy narrative assignments to allow students to interview a friend or fellow professor who is comfortable sharing their literacy journey instead could save students from feeling forced to write about traumatic experiences or disclose neurodiversities or disabilities. Similarly, if a student displays nuanced understanding of literacy development through reading and writing about a relevant memoir or work of creative nonfiction, I argue that this could demonstrate many of the same learning goals as the traditional, personal writing LN assignment. Furthermore, I once again affirm the *student's right to silence* as a needed, ethical composition classroom practice that avoids forced personal disclosures. Dolmage reminds us how “a trigger warning can save a student (or a reader of a book) from being, metaphorically, thrown down a set of stairs. But

trigger warnings need to incite a larger discussion about structural ableism and systemic violence” (2017). As such, instructors can warn students that they don’t have to write about something that makes them uncomfortable and provide trigger warnings about the effects of writing about trauma, but the strict requirement of personal narrative assignments still looms behind and casts a dark shadow of ableism.

I continue to urge composition instructors to consider whether they are sure that their pedagogy is doing more good than harm for all students. This is the lens I hope we can look through while we move into the future as teachers and scholars of composition and I urge all of us to pose these questions for all pedagogy and practices in our classrooms. Only the students themselves know whether assignments requiring personal narrative disclosure of life experiences truly benefit or harm them more, and sometimes effects of reliving trauma can become difficult long after an initial positive experience. Therefore, if we cannot know the true weight of personal writing assignments, the ethical decision seems to be to err on the side of protecting the student by creating flexible and/or alternative assignments that don’t entail inherently unequal emotional labor when we compare privileged students to those that have come from less privilege.

There is much continued work to be done in order to reinvent pedagogy that is friendly to neurodiverse and marginalized students. Though this paper has suggested two categories of pedagogical considerations that any composition instructor can undertake, it will require further the dedication of others in DS and composition in order to create more ethical pedagogy and practices that better serve our neurodiverse students and our students who have been marginalized.

REFERENCES

- Browning, E.R. (2014). Disability studies in the composition classroom. *Composition Studies*, 42(2), 96-117.
- Chandler, E. (2017). Troubled walking: Storying the in-between. *Journal of Narrative Theory*, 47(3), 317-336.
- Comer, K.B., & Harker, M. (2015). The pedagogy of the digital archive of literacy narratives: A survey. *Computers and Composition*, 35, 65-85.
- Dolmage, J. (2017). *Academic ableism disability and higher education*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Garland-Thomson, R. (2011). Integrating disability, transforming feminist theory. In K.Q. Hall (Ed.), *Feminist Disability Studies* (pp. 13-47). Indiana University Press.
- Kerschbaum, S.L. (2014). On rhetorical agency and disclosing disability in academic writing. *Rhetoric Review*, 33(1), 55-71.
- Kerschbaum, S.L. (2014). *Toward a New Rhetoric of difference*. NCTE.
- Lewiecki-Wilson, C., & Brueggemann, B.J. (Eds.). (2008). *Disability and the teaching of writing: A critical sourcebook*. Bedford/St. Martin’s.
- Lindquist, J., & Halbritter, B. (2019). Documenting and discovering learning: Reimagining the work of the literacy narrative. *College Composition and Communication*, 70(3), 413-445.
- Valentino, M.J. (1995). *Responding when a life depends on it: What to write in the margins when students self-disclose*. CCC presentation. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED385852.pdf>
- Valentino, M.J. (2012). Serving those who have served: Preparing for student veterans in our writing programs, classes and writing centers. *Writing Program Administration*, 36(1), 164-167.
- Weigel, B.H., & Miller, L.D. (2011). Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and the returning veteran: The rhetorical and narrative challenges. *Open Words: Access and English Studies*, 5(1), 29-37.
- Wood, T.K. (2011) Overcoming rhetoric: Forced disclosure and the colonizing ethic of evaluating personal essays. *Open Words: Access and English Studies*, 5(1), 38-52.
- Wood, T., Dolmage, J., Price, M., & Lewiecki-Wilson, C. (2014). Where we are: Disability and accessibility: Moving beyond disability 2.0 in composition studies. *Composition Studies*, (2), 14.