

7 Shaping Experience: Narration and Understanding

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In his account of a brief captivity by Indians, the famous Pocahontas account, John Smith tells of a ceremony in which Indian dancers and singers told of their own knowledge, their country, and the sea and into that narrative fitted some of what they had learned of Smith's own country. They carried the ceremony out for three days. Smith wrote, "The meaning whereof they told him was to know if he intended them well or no." The Indians attempted to understand John Smith by telling a story about him.

For the purposes of writing across the curriculum, one of the most significant aspects of narration is the convincing way it discloses that certain events taken together can make up a singular experience. The Indians who captured John Smith tried to combine their experiences with his into a story. Narrative is unique in its capacity to give a form or shape to the otherwise unlinked chain of experience.

Consider two texts:

stars faded
eastern sky grew light
clouds above horizon turned pink
sun rose

I woke early, restless and still tired at first. Lying in bed, I saw the stars fade and the eastern sky grow light; then the clouds above the horizon turned pink, and watching the sun rise, I was glad I was awake and starting a new day.

The differences between the list and the paragraph are conspicuous:

- (1) The list is a passively reported register of events; the paragraph is a narration of those same events as they were experienced by someone-
- (2) The list does not develop into a unified text except insofar as a reader may recognize a chronological sequence in it; the narrative does

develop-it builds to a conclusion in which the narrator relates the import of the sunrise. Although both the list and the narrative are chronological reports, the list is simply a chronicle; the narrative is a recounting of a personal experience, an experience told as a perception of events which forms a single coherent whole.

Here is another narrative:

Three years ago I moved into one of the old houses near the Michigan Tech campus with six other men. Several of the other men had high quality stereos. We soon found that slamming doors or walking briskly across the floor would cause the house to shake; this in turn caused tone arms to skip across albums being played. This annoyed the stereo owners and listeners greatly; it caused poor sound and damaged the stereo equipment.

For my ME370 (Analysis of Dynamic Systems) class project I chose to do an engineering analysis of this problem and tried to develop a viable solution to it. The analysis consisted of the writing of a computer program, and lab work to verify the program results.

The solution developed centers on the use of a foam rubber material which is used to help dampen the vibrations in the turntable's environment before they reach the turntable.

This narrative is a little different from the narrative paragraph above. It also tells of a significant experience, but it is intended to introduce a technical report, rather than to relate a personal experience. The first narrative ends with a personal conclusion, "I was glad I was awake and starting a new day." It is introspective. The second narrative ends with a solution to the tone arm skip. It is not introspective. Both narratives depend on the experience and perception of the narrator. In the first the narrator seems to address only herself. In the second, the narrator is reaching out to a different reader, a reader to whom he wishes to introduce a problem that needs solving.

To generalize from these examples, two characteristics of narrative that relate to classroom writing are:

1. Narrative is one way students can articulate for themselves what they know or can become comfortable with what they have found out. It can be a part of the process of learning.
2. Narrative is also a way students may approach an audience or come to terms with some of the special qualities of a particular audience.

Narrative and Learning

A narrative never exhaustively represents a series of real life events since the multitude of details, sensations, impressions, and segmentations

simultaneous with any experience are limitless. Narrators must sort out from such quantity of detail only those events which seem important or significant to the story at hand. Telling a story necessarily involves a process of selection. In the engineer's narrative, there are few details about the three years of living that the story covers. Only those events which affected the tone arms-slamming doors and brisk walking-are reported.

This process of selection is a form of understanding. A narrative conveys an understanding of events, not the events themselves. Narrating helps the narrator come to grips with an experience and comprehend it, at least somewhat. To ask students to write a narrative about an experiment, a project, or even what happened in class one day is to invite them to create an understanding of these experiences.

One fairly simple way to demonstrate how understanding is formed through narrative is to ask for two short narratives on the same topic. After the first narrative has been written, make available some information which will change what the student knows about that topic. The second narrative should reflect the changed understanding. When the narratives are compared the growth or change in the student's knowledge about the topic will be apparent.

This exercise works well when the topic is one with which the class has some familiarity-perhaps through a prerequisite course in chemistry, physics, math, or history- and the students write first about their previous encounter with the topic. After new aspects of the topic are presented, the students can be asked to write a narrative of their second encounter. Here are two narratives written a week apart by John R., a student in a class in physics for nonscience students:

January 16.

When was the last time I read about Mendel? It was in a sex education class in junior high school-that's where. It was so-o-o bad. But I still remember something about pink and white sweet-peas and about numbers, maybe because that was what that course was like. It was sex education and we spent the whole time on anatomy and numbers, Mendel is just one more set of dead or displaced numbers.

January 23.

When Mr. Porridge said to write about Mendel, I said more dead or displaced numbers. I wrote that down. What I have found out since then is that Poisson predicted the number of soldiers who would be kicked to death by horses in any given year in the German cavalry, that there are about seventy-five people bitten by dogs every year in New York City, and that the odds in roulette depend on zero coming up once in thirty-seven times. Mendel in sex education was pretty dull, but fitted into figures about probability, he goes better. And there is something to puzzle over, as Mr. Porridge says.

‘What kind of understanding has taken place in the interval between these two narratives? John shows that he understands something about contextual perception. Mendel in the context of a dull class in sex education seemed to be dull and displaced. Mendel in the context of probability theory, which John found appealing, became an interesting sort of statistician.

This pair of narratives shows what John understood, something of the nature of contextual perception, and what John did not know, or could not bring to bear, specific statements revealing his understanding of the associations in probability between Mendel and Poisson. In this case, the narratives provided his teacher with a particular follow-up assignment—the teacher had John write a one page definition of probability theory illustrated with reference to Mendel and to Poisson.

Another way teachers can get narratives from students about class experience is to assign a narrative log, a notebook in which a narrative is written about what is done for each new assignment or project. The log then becomes a record of the students’ understanding of the class, and as such it may be useful to teachers as well as students. Here is an example. A teacher had given a class an assignment which required each student to use a microcomputer. For students unfamiliar with the machine, the teacher had written a set of directions. As a part of the assignment, the students were also asked to write about their first experience with the microcomputer. The teacher thought that writing about the machine would help the students to understand it and also show how effective the directions were. Here is Sue B.’s narrative of her experience:

When I went in, no one was around, so I found my disk and figured out how to sign it out and how to put it in. But then, I couldn’t follow what to expect from the manual when it said hit “execute” and hit “insert” and the underlining part just kind of blew me away. I didn’t even try it out. I got a few things on it and then it took me awhile to figure out how to get the machine to accept my information for good. I didn’t run any printout the first time I was on it. I spent about two hours just trying to figure it out. And I just felt like dropping the class. This sudden fear that it is never going to work out. But since then I’ve used it a couple of times and it’s really easy now.

Writing such a narrative can contribute to learning to use a micro-computer and to becoming comfortable and confident with it. In her narrative, Sue moves quickly from a moment of desperation, “this sudden fear that it is never going to work out” to the realization that she has in fact become competent and comfortable with a micro-computer. Her understanding of the experience changes, in part,

because of the act of writing about it. The narrative also showed something about the teacher's part in the effort. Despite Sue's initial difficulties, the manual the teacher had written was adequate. Narrative logs of their work through the term can provide students with a record of their success in the course; they can also give teachers a running assessment of class assignments.

Narration and the Audience

The narratives we have considered so far have mainly been useful to the writers themselves. But narrative is also commonly written because it is useful to a broader audience. The narrative about tone arm skip examined earlier was in fact an introductory narrative for a five page report. It presented a personal experience, troubles with stereo tone arms skipping, as the basis for the problem addressed by the technical report. The narrative would be useful to all readers of the report. Contrast it with the narrative which follows, this one a progress report assigned as one stage in the composing of a longer report.

Progress Report on Tropical Fish Disease Manual

Project Description

The subject of my article is tropical fish diseases. While examining some of the common infections, it will point out symptoms and treatments also. To prevent reinfection, a chapter will be devoted on disease prevention. The finished product will be a reference manual in which alphabetically-indexed disease symptoms will refer to the page with the disease's description and treatment. For further information, please refer to my proposal submitted on October 21, 1980.

Work Completed

My work done on this article has progressed to the point of locating multiple sources from which I will do research. My preliminary work includes research and notetaking from these sources and basic organization of diseases with symptoms and treatments. See attachments from proposal letter dated October 21, 1980.

Work Schedule

As indicated by the work done, I have a considerable amount of work to do. By next weekend, November 8, 1980, I should have all the information that I need to begin the final organization. I realize that I am pushed for time, but I assure you that I will complete the project by November 14, 1980.

Written for the teacher, this progress report explains what has been done on the project so far, something both the student and the teacher need to understand. The narrative confirms a double commitment: by

the student to join in a classroom process of developing a specific paper for a specific time and place, and also by the teacher to take a formal part in this process as a guide along the way and as an arbiter of the final work.

This narrative might, however, have been assigned in a different way for a different audience, perhaps at different stages in the project. For example, it might have been assigned as a narrative in the form of a letter to the class-not to the teacher-about the experience of doing the work. It might offer at least one piece of advice to other persons with projects to do. Such a letter can be used in any class in which reports are required. Later in his project, Richard B. wrote the following letter to his class:

Dear Class:

When I was in junior high my parents bought an aquarium and put some goldfish in it. They wanted to get me interested in something to learn discipline and science or something like that.

That part went all right. I learned a lot about fish and in the last few years I have even made a little money selling some. I also lost a lot of fish, and learned something about fish diseases. So I thought I would write my manual about tropical fish diseases.

It was easy to get the information together for the report; most of it I knew and half the books I had. One good thing I did was to use index cards. I made a card for each disease. Then I wrote the symptoms of the disease on each card. But I stalled on the writing as long as I could. And I spent hours on a paragraph when I started.

Then I tried something from this class and got the draft done. I did the nonstop writing we do in class. I thought that to get a five-page fish report, if I could do ten pages nonstop I might have something. So I wrote ten pages without stopping. One page had nothing on it but the word fish about two hundred times. Then I went back and did the last line from the previous page over again and got going. In about forty-five minutes I had about ten pages.

That's it. I cut that down and worked in the notes, but the five pages I turned in as my draft were five pages straight out of my nonstop.

My advice is, try it.

Richard B.

Richard's letter begins with his experiences raising tropical fish. This beginning helps readers understand why he wanted to write his manual just as the narrative about tone arm skip helped readers understand the problem that technical report attempted to solve. The subject matter of Richard's letter, however, is not tropical fish but the common experience of the class. What organizes the events of the narrative is an

understanding of this experience. His narrative will help some students who are having similar problems writing their manuals and it will reinforce the experience of others.

But the subject of the letter is not simply writing-it is also the techniques which the class had been practicing. The letter describes the specific usefulness of notecards in this assignment. In a more abstract way it helps to explain the usefulness of classification in thought and analysis, since the system of cards which Richard employed was also a system of classification.

Richard had been simply directed to give advice to the class. But in giving that advice, he sorted out what was useful to him from the common experience of the class and thus provided a kind of narrative scrutiny of a portion of the course. Such scrutiny should be useful across the curriculum.

Here are some further kinds of narrative assignments:

Ask students to look over their notes from a selected period of time and to write a narrative comment, something like: "When I look back over yesterday's notes (or last week's), the first thing that strikes me is . . ." It sometimes works to ask for two paragraphs, one beginning with this sentence, the second beginning, "The next thing I see or think of is . . ." This assignment can be written for the class as an audience as well as for the teacher. It may provide the basis for a class discussion of a particular problem or be a good assignment for a teacher to carry out when preparing an exam, as a means of learning how well a class is prepared and how subtle or demanding an exam they will learn from.

Ask students to role play. Ask them to tell about what they are doing in a class as if they were persons outside the classroom. Instead of a book report, someone in an English class can write an opinion of a book as a member of a school board who has been asked to review some things used in the school. Instead of a lab report, someone in a science course may be asked to write a summary of a lab experiment as viewed by a visitor to the school from another time or another place-and classmates may then be asked to evaluate the report simply on the basis of their ability to recognize the experiment and to replicate it.

Ask students to write narrative introductions to even the most technical of their reports; teachers may find those introductions useful in identifying the strengths and weaknesses of those reports.

Teachers can write narratives of their own to the class, possibly in the form of letters. Instead of relying on the ability of a class to take notes, teachers can give them a letter on occasion which addresses some current topic and which can provide a basis for classroom discussion or for other further learning.

Narrative writing is valuable in any course which requires papers, projects, reports, or readings. Communicating experience is a fundamental function of language. Transforming experience into words requires both an understanding of the experience and an awareness of audience demands and interests. Narrative forms include: letters, informal classroom writing, notebook writing, progress reports, and formal introductions to technical reports; all can be used in the classroom as a means of helping students find out what they are learning, as a means of helping teachers assess the progress of learning, and as a means for both students and teachers to respond to particular audiences.