
In Defense of Storytelling

by Meg Peterson-Gonzalez

For as long as I can remember, my mother has told stories. Whenever I call her, she is always ready with new ones. One of her latest concerns my niece Sarah, who was so glad to finally turn four because being three “just lasted forever.” I spoke with my mother once about a friend who had decided never to have children. She thought it a great loss because children “fill your life with stories.” She tells stories, not only about her children, and now her grandchildren, but about every incident in her life. Through stories, she makes sense of her experience and communicates that sense to others.

Storytelling is a very human characteristic. Perhaps it is what sets us apart from other forms of life (Morton 1). In our stories, we frame our experience, manipulate it, give it focus and create meanings which guide us in meeting new experiences. Through the stories we create, we make meaning in and of the world.

Traditionally, composition instruction has been dedicated, as it is at Plymouth State, to “themes of exposition.” Composition instructors seem to accept the implicit assumption that fiction has no place in college writing instruction outside of “creative writing.” To many, even personal narrative is suspect because of its similarity to stories. The implication is that narrative of any sort only serves to distract us from the serious business of academic writing.

Plymouth State College is not the only place where the split between “expository” and “creative” writing is enforced. Expository writing is felt to be more aca-

demic, more serious, more worthy of attention. Most narrative tends to get shunted off to the “creative writing ghetto.” In many settings, creative writing is regarded as an easy, even frivolous, course— after all, it’s imagination, so anything goes. How could we maintain standards?

To me, this split seems artificial. What writing is not creative? Whether a lab report, a persuasive essay or a short story, writing involves a mind in the act of creation.

Neither can we say that narrative, whether personal, fictional or both, is frivolous. I have found it to be every bit as serious, and, in its own way, as rigorous and demanding, as any other form of academic writing.

The same type of crafting goes on in narrative writing as in expository prose. The writer still needs to gather information. The details need to be as specific as the statistics compiled for a research paper, because they must convince the reader to be drawn into the narrative world. The narrative still needs to have a focus or a thesis, although it may not be as explicitly stated as in an expository piece. This creates even greater challenge and greater demand to show rather than tell. The narrative has to be constructed so every element supports the main focus.

Narrative must be carefully crafted. Even in a piece based on personal experience, the writer makes decisions. She must arrive at a focus, decide where to begin and end, decide what to include and how to structure the piece. Experiences do not come to us as narrative. Students may start out with this misconception (“I’ll just write about my weekend.”), but they soon change their minds when they receive bland non-committal responses from their peers and even find themselves responding

to their own drafts with "So what?" We don't need a particular type of writing to teach the writing process.

Neither do we need a particular type of writing to evaluate products. Each semester I have my Composition class brainstorm the "qualities of good writing," and we never have trouble generating a list which applies equally well to narrative and expository writing.

In my Introduction to Literature course, I allow for a wide range of written response to literature. I stress what Donna Qualley refers to as "reader-based" papers (121). Many have chosen to respond to works with personal narrative. In response to published stories, they tell their own. Charlene wrote of her own abortion and the aftermath in response to poems about abortion by Gwendolyn Brooks, Anne Sexton and Lucille Clifton. In response to "Customs of the Country," a short story by Madison Smartt Bell (16-27) in which a woman tries to make up for past neglect and get her son back, Aaron weaves a gripping tale of his own feelings of abandonment when he was placed in foster care by his mother at the age of four. He tells his story--shadowy memories of Her, his mother--and concludes:

Who's going to give me the answers to what it is I'm looking for? Do I want Alma the lunch lady to tell me why She gave up? Or do I want my roommate to tell me where She is now? Better yet, why don't you tell me how I should forgive Her and move on? And in return, I'll tell Davy from "Customs of the Country" why his mother beat him up and why now he's got parents who will carry him off to bed after Joan Baez finishes on Romper Room. Yes, there is anger,

spite and overwhelming resentment--the kind that tastes like sour milk and melts the pen as the truth flows from it. Yes there will always be the unanswered questions and curiosities as to what might have happened if She had accepted the challenge. The narrator in "Customs of the Country" accepts the challenge and because of this I have a hard time relating to her. I bless her for not giving in and for her attempt to get her son back. I can, however, relate to Davy and all the Davys who may have those questions and curiosities which will never be answered. To those who feel the anger, spite and resentment, I say there is acceptance, but as the narrator says, "There is no forgiveness."

In his paper, Aaron contrasts his experience with that of the boy in the story, and his mother with the narrator of the story. In his highly personal voice, he not only exposes the main issues in the story, but uses them to better understand his own feelings.

Not all stories are as personal and powerful as Aaron's, but they don't need to be to enrich our understanding. I once ran a study group for high school students who were having a hard time with chemistry. What stories we told! Each night we would meet and try to frame our narratives around electron worlds. It worked. It was, in fact, the only way for us to make sense of chemistry.

When I was working for the Peace Corps in the Dominican Republic, we used to have the trainees write narratives in Spanish (Life Learning Experiences) creating small stories out of their encounters with Dominican culture. One volunteer wrote of feeling overwhelmed by the difference in cultures separating her from Dominican women:

Culture shock. A definite experience this past weekend. This happened while I was sitting in a kitchen with other women and recognized that they didn't have anything in common with me. They must think I am very strange. Here I am.. no family here, no husband, no children-- all that these women consider important. How could I explain to them that I consider learning about other cultures important? And that I am not sure about marriage? That I want to live independently? For these women, life is children, family, husbands. I am very different from them. I am sure they cannot understand me. (English translation)

Diane's story exposes a central conflict between her desire to be true to who she is and her need for connection in her new culture.

Another volunteer writes of her visit to a dying pueblo. She relates the experience and tries to make sense of it.

"There is no water for agriculture."

"Some days we don't eat anything."

"We cannot plant because there is no rain and soil has too many rocks."

"The children have parasites."

"There is no work."

"There is only one well."

"Some of the children eat dirt."

Friday, Doris, the supervisor of the health promoters, and I went to Media Cara, a campo near Pedro Corto. We visited every house and talked with the people about health and their lives.

Media Cara is a beautiful place--higher ground than Pedro Corto, close to the mountains, with space where horses and cows graze. But the people are barely surviving and some are not. The families don't have enough food to eat every meal and the parasites are eating the children. The parasites are so common that the mothers don't think of them as an illness. "We don't have illnesses here--only parasites."

In the face of this, somehow, the spirit of the majority of the people is still alive. They keep clean houses and strive for beauty--some flowerpots with plants on the walls or a picture of a saint. It is enough to say that life is worth it. (English translation)

In this story, Maggie struggled in her attempt to make sense of the things she had seen in Media Cara. In her revisions of the story, she created new meaning. She decided to focus not on the hopelessness of what she had seen but on the triumph of the human spirit visible in the small touches residents of Media Cara added to make their houses into homes.

Diane and Maggie struggled, through their stories, to make sense of both the language and the new culture in which they were to live.

Sometimes my literature students create fictional pieces in response to themes in the texts they read. In response to Gloria Steinam's essay "Sisterhood," Alicia creates a tale of closeness and betrayal about best friends who grow up together sharing every confidence until they are separated by boyfriends. For the racism unit, Shawn writes a story about a boy who walks with his father through the black section of town and feels the first chill of his own racism as he contrasts what

he finds in darkness and light.

I was struck, as I read these pieces, by how the stories, even when they did not mention particular works, served to intensify and clarify the meanings found in the texts better than a more traditional literary analysis would have. Perhaps, paradoxically, by telling one particular story in the full richness of all its detail we become more general in our implications. We need to value our stories, from the anecdotes and examples that bring life to an expository text to the extended narratives we use to frame experience--the stories we tell ourselves in order to bring order and meaning to our lives.

Stories are not extras, not meaningless little forays into make-believe worlds, good only for recreation—but something much more fundamental. They are how we understand. They can help us make sense of chemistry, literature, and other academic pursuits, and, as my mother so well knows, of life.

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