

NOTE: Although I like the formatting and the direction this essay is heading, it is absolutely a rough draft. I intend to include an entire section which illustrates examples of narrative scholarship produced by my students including a piece written about the gang related murder of a student in our class, a piece written by a young man who survived a bombing in Iraq, and a piece discussing Munchausen disease and how a young woman ruined all her friendships because of it. When it's completed, this piece could be anywhere from 15 - 25 pages depending upon how much detail and length are desired.

*Adrian Matthew Zytkoskee
Department of Writing Studies
The American University of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates
azytkoskee@aus.edu*

Narrative Scholarship: Writing Life into Academia

Those who do not have power over the story that dominates their lives, the power to retell it, rethink it, deconstruct it, joke about it, and change it as times change, truly are powerless, because they cannot think new thoughts.

-Salman Rushdie

Narrative Scholarship, the combining of story and research, is not a new concept. Take a stroll through any book store and you will find an array of titles offering just such an approach. Authors like Stephen Hawkins, Terry Tempest Williams, and Bill Bryson offer perfect examples of academics who heavily rely upon narrative as a means for giving form to their abstract concepts and data. And, despite the traditional attitude often found in academia which demeans and excludes the use of narrative in “scholarly work,” the fact that through narrative scholarship Hawkins writes best sellers about Quantum Physics, Bryson is able to simultaneously educate and entertain regarding the biological world, and Williams effectively defends the ecology of our planet through her very personal narratives, demonstrates that the combination of research with narrative is both a versatile and powerful methodology. Although, as illustrated by the aforementioned authors, narrative scholarship may find application in just about any rhetorical situation, the focus of this particular essay will be upon the composition classroom for two reasons. First, as a composition teacher, this is the space in which my own research and stories

reside. Secondly, it is probably the most controversial venue for the use of narrative scholarship due to the tight grasp traditional ideologies and pedagogies maintain on higher education. In response, this essay explores both the theoretical and pedagogical application of narrative scholarship in the composition classroom and how this approach leads to the creation of meaningful, interesting, and powerful texts.

Do narratives truly belong in a composition classroom?

Although writing instruction has frequently been demoted to the position of a perfunctory task, in truth, writing is what binds cultures together, enables us to express our humanity, and often allows us to define reality and the very way we think. As James Berlin, composition theorist, notes, "In teaching writing, we are not simply offering training in a useful technical skill that is meant as a simple complement to the more important studies of other areas. We are teaching a way of experiencing the world, a way of ordering and making sense of it" (277). Although writing functions to serve many empirical and analytical needs, it is a symbolic transformation of individual human-experience and should, therefore, reflect both knowledge *and* humanity. Therefore, to focus solely upon the regurgitation of academic data OR to emphasize the personal without helping the student situate her/his story to a larger dialogue is to neglect the essential union of the personal with the academic.

When we use an approach such as narrative scholarship to help students relate and situate their narratives within a larger context full of both the stories of others and empirical research, we achieve this union by connecting lives with information, faces with data, places with argument, and understanding with difference. In doing so, we help students learn to critically examine reality through the composition of meaningful texts. Stella Thompson, a veteran professor of composition and rhetoric, posits that the employment of critical narratives in the

composition classroom allows students to “construct identity” and “interpret meaning,” while celebrating difference and creating powerful discourse (6). She writes, “The student narratives that survive the rigorous academic process, with genuine voices and stories intact, become significant social texts, and, more than personal and academic artifacts; the surviving, story-rich narratives become political and cultural indicators of a literate society’s continuing development” (6). Narrative scholarship, in other words, not only invites students into their own writing, it creates writing which extends beyond the boundaries of the personal and yet retains the life and context which is so often missing in the strictly academics.

If, as writing teachers, we seek to create spaces of inclusion, to capitalize on the existing literacies of our students, to promote critical connections between life experience and education, and to help guide students towards finding their own voice so that they can create powerful discourse, then narrative scholarship is an effective tool with which to begin.

Even if Narrative Scholarship helps students create powerful texts, is it really teaching them the types of composition skills they’ll need to know for other classes?

Having taught composition for six years now, I can honestly say that there are few essay assignments which even begin to have as comprehensive an approach to the nuts and bolts of college writing as Narrative Scholarship. The following list does not exhaust the possibilities but should give an idea of what can be taught with this type of essay. First, due to the fact that narrative scholarship either employs characters to relate data through dialogue or it transitions back and forth between narrative and traditional exposition, the use of various types of punctuation (especially quotation marks) is essential and quickly learned by the student author. Secondly, character and setting description is essential and therefore teaches students the use of colorful adjectives/adverbs and how to paint a visual picture using language. Third, Narrative Scholarship is typically argumentative in nature in that it has a point or idea about which it is

trying to convince the reader. Therefore, students have to consider their audience's needs and beliefs. Fourth, Narrative Scholarship is excellent for introducing rhetorical strategies such as the classic *Logos*, *Ethos*, and *Pathos*. We will often discuss how to achieve the right balance of emotion with data or logic. In addition, the use of personal narrative as a form of evidence is the very definition of *Ethos*. Finally, Narrative Scholarship offers an abundance of research possibilities which actually extend beyond the boundaries of a typical introductory writing course assignment. Students in my classes are often required to have a "field experience" of their own relating to their topic and, therefore, learn how to include interviews and personal experience in a properly documented manner.

This sounds great, but can you give an example of what it might actually look like?

My first day in the Rhetoric and Composition graduate program was polarized. It began with a research methodology class which, for nearly two hours, focused on proper MLA format and annotated bibliographies. Afterwards, as we shuffled out of the class like a fleet of zombies, panic struck. I wondered how I had gotten involved in such an irrelevant field and why I wasn't pursuing something less disconnected from reality. The idea of researching incredibly dry and formal modes of discourse for years was overwhelming. Furthermore, I had little to no interest in teaching (or at least focusing upon) the conventional, rule-driven material it appeared I was going to learn.

Much to my relief, the next class presented a different perspective on what teaching writing could entail. After we'd settled into our seats, Dr. Corey Lewis, a published ecocritic, informed us that our writing workshop would focus upon narrative scholarship.

A young woman with a serious expression raised her hand and asked, "What exactly does the term 'narrative scholarship' mean?" I had been wondering the same thing.

Corey, as he requested we call him, asked, “Has anyone heard that term before?”

No one had. However, a man with bushy white hair and an even bushier beard said, “Well, I’ve never heard the term, but I’d guess that it means combining narrative with research.”

Corey nodded. “That’s pretty much right on. The term narrative scholarship was coined by nature writer and ecocritic Scott Slovic...who was actually my dissertation advisor at University Nevada Reno. The concept behind narrative scholarship, however, is not really new. People have been combining story with research for years. Writers like John Muir, Mary Austin, Gary Snyder, Barry Lopez, Terry Tempest Williams, and Leslie Marmon Silko all offer good examples. But, for the academic world, it’s still a pretty ground breaking concept.” He walked over to the white board and slid back a partition to reveal three quotes. They read:

There's the constant annoyance of terms like "creative writing" and "creative nonfiction"--as though criticism didn't require creativity, as though thinking and creativity were mutually exclusive. All good writing is both creative and somehow personal; all of it has a place in the stories of a life; all of it tells stories. Why pretend otherwise?

~SueEllen Campbell

Language without context, without grounding in experience, means next to nothing. A life without context is impossible.

~Scott Slovic

Storytelling, combined with clear exposition, produces the most engaging and trenchant scholarly discourse.

~Scott Slovic

As I read the quotes and contemplated the possibilities of combining story and research, I found both my curiosity and excitement growing. Maybe I wasn’t doomed to a career of only teaching proper comma usage and “appropriate” academic tone. I jotted down the quotes and then said, “This sounds really cool, but how exactly does it work and will it really fly in an academic setting?”

Corey sat down on the edge of his desk, pausing before speaking. “We’re going to cover a lot of different approaches to creating and teaching narrative scholarship. In other words, there’s not really a set formula, like an exact measurement of how much story versus research is needed for narrative scholarship. How it should be approached and constructed will vary depending upon your subject matter, the type of story you have to tell, the types of research you’ve gathered, and, of course, your audience—that’s a big one.”

He glanced around the room, looking for signs of confusion before going on. “In regards to whether it’s accepted in the academic world, the answer is yes and no. People understand and are moved by stories. *Pathos* and *ethos* are huge parts of successful writing and the academic world increasingly understands the need for qualitative research and contextualized information. We need human beings and animals and landscapes to attach to the data we gather. However, there are still many academics who reject and criticize any reference to the personal. They see *true*,” he did the finger quotes gesture, “research as being quantitative and detached from biases. The reality is, though, that there is no such thing as contextually detached, a-political research. How information is gathered, examined, and presented is always influenced by human motives and agendas. That’s why, when done well, narrative scholarship is actually a more thorough, accurate, and honest form of research than a lot of traditional approaches.”

How is it actually taught?

Teaching narrative scholarship can be both a simple and complex process. It can be simple in that it involves teaching and combining two common (and often familiar) forms of writing: story and research. It can be complex in that appropriately combining and balancing the two genres takes practice and a fine-tuned rhetorical understanding. The following pedagogical approach is designed to achieve this balance.

Readings – Begin the unit by assigning two essays, chapters, or excerpts to read. Both readings should cover the same topic (social or environmental issues are typically good choices). One of the readings should be a traditional, research based argument. The other should be a narrative scholarship piece. Have the students write a brief response outlining their questions and reactions to both readings.

Discussion – After the students have completed the readings and handed in their responses, have a group discussion which defines “narrative scholarship” and looks at possible advantages and disadvantages of its practice. Solicit feedback from the students regarding their personal reactions and questions.

Story Parts – It’s usually best to begin the story portion of the unit before the research. Students tend to enjoy stories more and are, as a result, drawn into the assignment. I have found that the best approach is to cover and practice elements of stories individually. For example, discuss and practice character development, the creation of setting, dialogue, writing action, and plot. For each of these areas, give the students a few good examples to read and have them create their own example. By covering story elements separately, students tend to feel less overwhelmed and get a good feel for each specific design. In the end, they should have a collection of character sketches, action scenes, conversations, setting descriptions, and plot concepts. While creating these elements, they should be considering life experiences which might nicely connect with important issues.

Research Methodology – This is a crucial portion of the unit and should be emphasized. As powerful as stories can be, without solid research, narrative scholarship becomes more personal narrative than scholarship.

Begin by presenting students with a variety of research methodologies. For example, discuss (and demonstrate if technology allows) research techniques involving data-bases, search engines, library research, interview techniques, skimming practices (including referencing authors' work cited pages for leads), and journals.

Research Assignment – Have students pick a topic with which they have either had personal experience or one with which they plan to gain personal experience in the immediate future (an upcoming interview or fieldtrip, for example). Issues such as pollution, logging, road-rage, gangs, animal issues and/or rights, food and health debates, immigration, and educational policies are a few examples. Once again, emphasize that students should not select topics which will cause personal discomfort (abortion is great example). Next, have them gather and organize as much relevant data (statistics, research findings, scholarly quotes, etc...) as possible on their subject. Encourage field trips and interviews. Finally, have them assemble the data and turn in a several page report on their findings.

Approaching Narrative Scholarship – Begin with a discussion on audience awareness and the types of stories and data which might work well for different crowds. Next, discuss the various methods of integrating story with research. For example, present the “data sandwich” which begins with narrative, transitions to data, and then ends with narrative. Another technique is “employing the character.” With this approach, characters in a story are used as the mouth pieces for which data is presented. This one works particularly well because there is no need to transition in and out of story mode (the small illustrative piece in the beginning of this section demonstrates this approach). Yet another approach is to base the essay on formal discourse and then include small anecdotes illustrating the data. The opposite, telling a story and integrating

bits and pieces of data when appropriate, can also be employed. Have students consider how these approaches might differ and which audiences might respond well to each one.

Creating Narrative Scholarship – Once the students have created story elements, gathered research, read examples of narrative scholarship as well as discussed narrative scholarship approaches, it will be time for them to create their own narrative scholarship pieces. Have them submit a rough outline on how they plan to integrate story with the research they have already completed. Once these have been completed and approved, students should begin writing and synthesizing their data with story. I would recommend having several workshops with specific guidelines and suggestions for feedback.

A Larger Playing Field – At the beginning of the unit, let the students know that there will be extra credit available for anyone who takes the time to submit their narrative scholarship piece for publication. Once the projects have been written, spend a class period discussing publication venues, submission guidelines, and methods for discovering information regarding these elements.

In conclusion, narrative scholarship has a great deal to offer our students. It is accessible, its perspective is broad and inclusive, it values life, it makes sense of information, and rhetorically it is a powerhouse. Diane P. Freedman, professor of English at the University of New Hampshire, writes that narrative scholarship is:

[A]esthetic (it's more pleasurable to read, more literary), political (it's more accessible, usable), epistemic (how we know is dependent upon who we are and with what narratives--our own and others--we come to others), self-expressive (if our histories and allegiances are multiple why not our compositions?), and psychological or pedagogic (students learn much by examining how and why they

ask and conclude what they do, including learning to write more "naturally" and for a wider audience).

Narrative scholarship is the way of the future. With each step the academic community takes in the direction of qualitative research, stories become more crucial in understanding and contextualizing gathered information. Researchers are beginning to understand that true objectivity recognizes the subjectivity of all research and therefore, presents a complete picture saturated with living creatures and landscapes. We owe it to our students to teach them how to synthesize research with reality, to connect the dots of information to form a picture. This is not indulgent, this is effective writing.