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NARRATIVE DISCOURSE AND THE BASIC WRITER

ABSTRACT: *This paper argues that narrative is an important aim of discourse for basic writers. Although a major rhetorical strategy in our professional lives, narrative often does not gain the attention it deserves in classroom practice. The author begins by examining the use of narrative by leaders in the field of basic writing, then focuses on the significance of narrative for students: the use of narrative yields legitimacy, allows for metacognition, and provides a vehicle for numinous expression.*

Basic writers have only themselves. They are the method. There is no projected self on paper, no repertoire of discourse strategies to which successes and failures may be attributed. In basic writing courses, students hurl themselves into the void, expecting to receive the benefits that literacy brings. To the basic writer, everything is personal; they try to capture their lives on the page. The most significant form of discourse for these writers, therefore, is narrative. Through narrative, basic writers incorporate the world of the academy into their own lives. To examine the power of narrative for the basic writer, I will first examine the role that narratives play in our own professional lives as teachers and theorists of basic writing. Then I will focus on the significance of narrative for basic writers.

Pledging Allegiance: The Mina Shaughnessy Controversy

The current controversy over the value of narrative discourse for basic writers began with the Min-zhan Lu essay. In the

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Spring 1991 issue of the *Journal of Basic Writing*, she suggested that *Errors and Expectations*, the seminal 1977 work of the late Mina Shaughnessy, belied conservatism. Lu continued the attack in a 1992 article in *College English*. According to Lu, Shaughnessy feared conflict: Shaughnessy (along with her conservative counterparts such as W. E. B. DuBois, Lionel Trilling, and Irving Howe) made instructors hesitant to use conflict and struggle as a vehicle for writing in the classroom. "The consensus among the gatekeepers, converters, and accomodationists," Lu wrote, "furnished some Basic Writing teachers with a complacent sense that they already know all about the 'problems' Basic Writers have with conflict and struggle. This complacency makes teachers hesitant to consider the possible uses of conflict and struggle . . . " (907).

Response followed. In the Fall 1993 issue of the *Journal of Basic Writing*, Patricia Laurence reminded readers of the political complexities surrounding Open Admissions in the 1970s at City College of The City University of New York. Shaughnessy, Laurence wrote, "guided institutional change with a nuanced and sophisticated appreciation of the diversity of the faculty, awareness of the public, and a rhetorical strategy of indirection and understatement. What is now fashionably explicit [i.e., airing political conflicts in public forums] had to be implicit at that historical and educational moment at City College" ("Vanishing Site" 27). Laurence continued her rebuttal in the December 1993 issue of *College English*, which featured a "Symposium on Basic Writing, Conflict, and the Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy." Laurence advised a moment of clarity: "I think Lu and her supporters need to get real about the world I'm talking about [the world of poverty from which basic writers often come]. Unless someone offers to pay my rent and to put shoes on my little girl, no one is going to convince me that hovering between the two worlds (educated and uneducated) is the place for me" (885).

Min-zhan Lu's attack on Mina Shaughnessy's politics reveals more about Lu's beliefs than about Shaughnessy's. Lu was trying to throw an academic fast ball, a long-standing tradition among assistant professors who must, in Harold Bloom's terms, deliberately misread the work of the previous generation in order to gain academic maturity. Like so many new writing instructors, Lu seems zealous to rack up the mistakes of others and, in doing so, create replacement paradigms. However, while Lu is passionate about bringing the discourse of conflict into the basic writing curriculum, she does not do it effectively.

It is difficult for me to imagine why Lu did not simply phone Laurence, a past director of the City College composition program, and ask what the students were reading in English 1, the first basic composition course, designed by Shaughnessy in 1970. If Lu had done this, she would have found that students were reading "Chapman and Abraham's *Black Voices,* Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha,* René Marques' *The Oxcart,* George Orwell's *Essays,* Richard Wright's *Black Boy,* and Carolina Maria de Jesus's *Diary"* (Laurence, "The Vanishing Site" 20)—instead of, say, *The Autobiography of Henry Adams.* Lu probably would have changed the tone of her article, if not the thesis itself. But for Min-zhan Lu, the battle was worth it all: It further illuminated for her the "urgent need" for those interested in " 'education as a process of repositioning' " ("Symposium" 901).

The Lu/Laurence interchange is important for what it reveals about the significant place of narrative in the scholarly discourse of basic writing. Both Lu and Laurence use the narrative mode to support their positions. Lu, for example, uses Lionel Trilling's short story, "Notes on a Departure," to analyze his position on initiation into the university as a process of submission. Lu also identifies Peter Rondinone, an English professor at LaGuardia Community College, CUNY, as a "new generation of minority educators" ("Conflict" 908). Her analysis of his position of deracination (a position she rejects) employs him as a character in her narrative. In her story, there are "good guys" in composition (David Bartholomae, Anthony Petrosky, Tom Fox, Carolyn Hill, Bruce Horner, Glynda Hull, Elaine Lees, and Mike Rose ["Symposium"]) and "bad guys" (Mina Shaughnessy, Patricia Laurence, Peter Rondinone, Mary Epes, and Ann Murphy ["Conflict"]). Amazing is Lu's use of value-dualism in which she forces the reader to *either* accept her position of teaching conflict *or* accept a position of complacency. Such value-dualisms—disjunctive pairs in which the disjuncts are seen as exclusive rather than inclusive—are themselves mechanisms of patriarchy. In her narrative, Lu seeks to oppress teachers of basic writing by forcing them to make choices that are badly nuanced (at least) and hierarchically organized (at worst). Lu's use of the tools of paternalism in her narrative suggests the flaws of her position.

Laurence's narrative employs symbols—verbal units—which, as defined by Northrop Frye, "conventionally and arbitrarily, stand for and point to things outside the place where they occur" (73). For Laurence, 1970 was a year of fire: "Initiated in

1970 because of student takeovers and the shutting down of the campus, Open Admissions was propelled by the virtual shutdown of the college campus, including the barring of gates and the burning of rooms (the beautiful music room in Finley Student Center) and buildings. Open Admissions began on the campus of City College with a virtual revolution" ("The Vanishing Site" 23). Laurence employs neither characterization nor value dualism; rather, she uses images to lead the reader to conclude that the City College faculty negotiated not error but the "rage and frustrations of minority students in New York City" ("Symposium" 882). Laurence's point, made narratively, follows Frederic Jameson's: ". . . there is nothing that is not social and historical—indeed, that everything is 'in the last analysis' political (Jameson 20). Shaughnessy's work, a response to a political situation that is itself vanishing, is an artifact that emerged "from the turmoil of an institution, a city, a society" (Laurence, "The Vanishing Site" 27). While Lu sees Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* as an archetypal symbol of human action as a whole, Laurence insists that Shaughnessy's book exists in a literal and descriptive phase, as a motif and as a sign of someone whose life and untimely death changed American educational history.

The impulse to narrate is an impulse to seek legitimation. While Lu and Laurence differ in their narrative strategies, both use this discourse form to declare publicly the important place of basic writing in American higher education. Ultimately, this use of narrative as a form of legitimation is central to narrative in the scholarly discourse of basic writing. Through narratives, basic writing teachers find ways of relating our work to public interest. By narrating, we counter the charges leveled by David Bartholomae that "most basic writing programs marginalize students" and "preserve them as different," while basic writing teachers merely "satisfy their liberal reflexes by making students into more complete versions of themselves in courses that don't work" (qtd. in Greenberg 65). Through narrative—the sequence of stories and their manifestation in discourse—we sanction our acts before those who would dismiss us with a formulated phrase.

Narrative is one of our major rhetorical strategies as writers. Why, then, don't most of us use narrative in our basic writing classrooms? Do we theorize about the value of narrative in the same way that we have readily embraced cognitive theories? A perusal of seventeen years of issues of the *Journal of Basic*

Writing reveals but one article explicitly devoted to narrative by Kathleen G. Dixon. "Listening to what our students say about their preference for narrative," Dixon states, "may help us help them and simultaneously teach us more about human differences and development, intellectually and otherwise" (16). True, indeed, but have we done so?

Mike Rose and the Use of Narrative

Mike Rose's two case studies—*Writer's Block: The Cognitive Dimension* and *Lives on the Boundary: The Struggles and Achievements of America's Underprepared*—demonstrate that for many teachers, narrative has no place in the composition curriculum. In the earlier book, Rose identifies and analyzes the behaviors that characterize students' writing blocks. Rose conducted careful case studies in which students with writer's block composed essays on specific expository topics. In Rose's opinion, expository essay topics represent the kinds of assignments most frequently required across the university curriculum (28). Rose gave students a three-page case history of Angelo Cacci, a 32-year-old lonely clerk in a large insurance company who was visiting a counseling center with complaints of depression. Students were to interpret the patient's narrative in reference to a passage from Karl Jaspers' *Man in the Modern Age*. Students with "low" writing blocks did quite well on this topic, whereas the "high" blockers could write only about forty-five words in sixty minutes.

Three points are important to make about Rose's widely praised study. First, Rose assumes that exposition best represents university assignments. He thus operationalizes a position he first stated in a 1983 essay in which he called for less narrative and more academic writing in basic writing classrooms. Second, research has shown that tasks such as the expository topics used by Rose greatly inhibit the fluency of writers (Ruth). Rose demonstrates no knowledge of these studies. Third, Rose draws conclusions about students' writer's block without considering whether it was the task itself that caused the block. Indeed, subsequent research has demonstrated that narrative tasks provide the best reflection of basic writing ability (Breland, et al.,; Ruth and Murphy; Elliot, Plata, and Zelhart).

Moreover, Rose missed the significance of his student's interpretation of his assignment. In an interview with Rose, the student focused on a passage from Karl Jaspers' book: "I've heard this type of argument before, and they say, 'Farmers, oh,

they grow. They have such a wonderful life.' And it's not true. They can be real, real, you know, just as unhappy and miserable and a lot worse off than we are" (46). For this student, the Jaspers' quote is itself an essay prompt, an occasion for meditation on what Gilligan calls "a fracture of human relationship" (31). The student's response reveals a subtle understanding of the intricacies of life's relationships, intricacies that would have been best captured in a narrative mode. Rose did not allow this writer that vehicle of expression.

In his own writing, however, Rose is highly autobiographical. For example, in *Lives on the Boundary*, Rose is still stymieing students with quotes from Karl Jaspers (143), but his own technique is narrative. There are stories of students: Laura, the first character in the book, who has dropped Rose's course four times (*Lives* 1). There is Rose's own history: the down payment on his childhood house, paid for with his mother's engagement ring (*Lives* 12). And there is dialogue to make Mike Hammer blush: the ex-con Willie Oats tells Rose, "You, You—are— teaching—the—f_ _ _—outta me! (*Lives* 146). Yet Rose, it seems, does not allow his students the same freedom to choose the discourse form that he employs so well.

Like Rose, the academy holds the expository essay as an implicitly democratic form of communication. With its origin in Montaigne's *Essais*, the essay appears to incorporate the values of American democracy. Nevertheless, as Joel Hafner urges, we should see the essay as a cultural product, as an encoded system of ideology (131). Because it incorporates the values of the academy, exposition is often understood as the sole vehicle for analysis. An embodiment of academic ethos, it appears to ensure objectivity, distance, and critical thought. Upon closer examination, these values are in reality the manifestation of paternalism; or, as Gail Stygall finds using Foucaultian analysis, evidence that power and privilege have been incorporated into the basic writing curriculum. Basic writing students are moved too rapidly away from their experiential responses. By denying students the power of narrative, we cut our basic writers off from their deepest way of knowing.

The rules of expository writing are themselves evidence of the subservient role that is forced on students. They learn that an introduction must precede the subject, that a thesis must be stated, that two or three points must be made about that thesis, and that conclusions must be drawn. Personal opinions, they are taught, must not influence analysis. An undeveloped the-

sis, a superfluous example, a speculative conclusion, overuse of the first-person-singular pronoun—failure in these areas could cost students a lower grade. Rose's two works, published five years apart, reveal his consistent prejudice against narrative in the composition classroom, despite his unfailing use of it in his own writing. One of Min-zhan Lu's "good guys," Rose's own practices suggest an irony that is implicit in both theorists: neither appears to look very hard at those who are unfortunate enough to be the targets of their attention.

There is, nevertheless, hope. Richard C. Gebhardt recently noted the composition field's growing interest in personal writing and literary nonfiction. More open-ended and provisional than the traditional academic model of argumentative exposition, personal writing and its use of narrative is part of the framework advocated by composition instructors such as Wendy Hesford to help bridge "the chasms which alienate students from one another, from teachers, and from the learning process" (14). There is also Nancy K. Miller's excellent argument for personal criticism, a type of analysis that "entails explicitly autobiographical performance within acts of criticism" (1). And there are two superb models of narratives which should be read by all teachers of basic writing: Lynn Z. Bloom's "Finding a Family, Finding a Voice: A Writing Teacher Teaches Writing Teachers" and Elizabeth A. Flynn's "Composing as a Woman." In decentering the shallow appearance of comprehension and the combative authority implicit in much exposition, we can help basic writers discover ways of negotiation and mediation that are more humane than the egocentric drive to prove a point.

The Significance of Narrative for Basic Writers

The controversy over Mina Shaugnessy's supposed conservatism is an example of how "experts" in the field of basic writing use narrative discourse in their own writing. Many of these experts—including Mike Rose—use narrative in their own writing but refuse to provide tasks for their students that allow for the use of that mode of discourse. Implicit in this analysis is the fact that, for the basic writer, narrative is an aim, not a mode, of discourse. Prematurely buried by Robert J. Connors in "The Rise and Fall of the Modes of Discourse," narrative has never been, nor will ever be, merely a limiting and restrictive rule-bound system for invention. Narrative is, to use James Kinneavy's famous term, an aim: the reason for the existence of

discourse itself. However, Kinneavy is mistaken in placing narrative among the modes; rather, narrative belongs with expressive, referential, literary, and persuasive discourse—"all of which exist so that humans might achieve certain purposes in their use of language with one another" (38).

What are the reasons—the "certain purposes"—that make narrative indispensable to basic writers? If we define the basic writer as one who is unable to play upon ideas and who has "difficulty with framing or holding on to a central or organizing idea" (Shaughnessy 236), then narrative aids in the development of these desired characteristics. First, narrative can provide legitimacy. Just as the use of narrative provides legitimacy for the profession of basic writing in the articles of Min-zhan Lu and Patricia Laurence and for literary theory in the article of Bruce Robbins, so too narrative provides a sense of authenticity for basic writers' lives. The past ten years of the life of Richard Rodriguez have been spent in justifying the ways of the academy to his Mexican heritage. Perhaps as much time needs to be allowed to each of our basic writing students to examine their nontraditional backgrounds and their place in the highly structured literate society to which they seek access during and after college.

Second, narrative can provide metacognition. I have defined narrative in this paper as a sequence of stories and their manifestation in discourse. Gérard Genette warns us to avoid convention and not define narrative as simply "the representation of an event or sequence of events, real or fictitious, by means of language and, more particularly, by means of written language" (127). To define narrative in this fashion, Genette warns, is to "give credence, perhaps dangerously, to the idea or feeling that narrative tells itself, that nothing is more natural than to tell a story or to put together a set of actions in a myth, a tale, an epic, or a novel" (127). Or an essay. The reason that narrative is so difficult is that it asks the writer to make a distinction between the story—"a sequence of actions or events, conceived as independent of their manifestation in discourse" (Culler 169-70)—and the presentation of these events. To write a narrative, a basic writer must select and edit events, must think about the process of thinking. This process, often referred to as metacognition, is one of the higher-order thinking skills that we so prize in the academy as evidence of exceptional cognitive development (Dixon, Riegel).

Third, narrative can provide access to the numinous of human consciousness. Just as the rational tradition stresses the

formation of concepts that can be grasped by the intellect and analyzed through systems—metacognition is a byproduct of rationality—the nonrational tradition emphasizes the awakening of the spirit, the feeling of awe, the idea of mystery, the sensation of fascination, the association of feelings, and the contemplation of the holy. This concept of nonrational understanding is delineated by Rudolf Otto in his 1923 classic, *The Idea of the Holy*. Merging the Latin word *numen* (literally, a nodding of the head in an expression of consent) with the word *omen* (not only a sign but also a good wish), Otto defined a category of *a priori* thought to offset the bias we find in our Western culture toward the rational. The possibility of exploration with the numinous is possible through narrative. As Otto recognizes, a means of direct expression of the numinous—itself a complex web of nonhierarchical visions of human connection—rests in narrative.

Stories, as Leslie Marmon Silko writes in the opening pages of her novel *Ceremony,* "aren't just entertainment. / Don't be fooled. They are all we have, you see, / all we have to fight off / illness and death. / You don't have anything / if you don't have the stories" (2). By accepting the nonrational along with the rational, teachers of basic writing allow the power of narrative to provide legitimacy and metacognition, and—perhaps most significant of all—to foster the magic of stories. Through narrative, students discover and create the metaphors for their lives.

Conclusion: Richard Rodriguez Meets Robinson Crusoe

In the final chapter of Richard Rodriguez's *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father*, Rodriguez quotes the opening passage in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* in which Crusoe's father counsels him against going abroad to seek his fortune. Rodriguez then recalls his own father's voice when he was fourteen and his father was fifty. "Life is harder than you think, boy." "You're thinking of Mexico, Papa," the teenager replied. "You'll see," said the father (202). All basic writers are Crusoes, hurling themselves into the void. Like Rodriguez, all decide to leave the safety and security of the world they know best, and all find themselves marooned on a desert island as a reward for their initiative. As Martin Green demonstrates about the legacy of the Crusoe story, wanderers survive by means of work, "of cunning and luck and skills and tools" (22). If basic writers are successful, they do more than survive: they prosper.

Yet there are darker parts of the Crusoe story. Do the wanderers survive when they meet alien cultures only by killing and enslaving others? Is the Crusoe story a justification of a morally justified imperialism? If we are not careful, our students may find themselves victims of an academically justified imperialism. As teachers of basic writing, we de-emphasize the darker parts of the story; we must help our students explore the relationships between their lives and their ideas.

If we are to ensure these explorations, the field of basic writing must privilege narrative discourse. In the success of this group of students, more than any other, lies the truth about our allegiance to the values of participatory democracy. Mina Shaughnessy told us seventeen years ago that as we improve the quality of college education and allow for the entitlements of basic writers, we move deeper into the realizations of a democracy (294). In a keynote address delivered at the first Shaughnessy Memorial Conference in 1980, Virginia Smith noted that Shaughnessy's "three beliefs were that teaching makes a difference, that the individual is important, and that literacy is power" (19). Mina Shaughnessy's vision of democracy was articulated in the success of her basic writers. Because they and they alone are most likely to provide fresh perspectives on both knowledge itself and the ways that students acquire that knowledge, our future is tied to theirs. If we turn them into expository imperialists, we and they are lost.

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