Storytelling and Academic Discourse: Including More Voices in the Conversation

Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk

ABSTRACT: In this article, Mlynarczyk traces her career-long exploration of the relationship between personal, narrative writing and so-called academic discourse. Believing that both are important for college students, particularly students placed in basic writing or ESL composition, she has come to believe that rather than viewing the two as separate modes of discourse, students need to use a "translingual" approach, cultivating "rhetorical dexterity" while they develop as college writers. As concerned teachers and scholars, the challenge is to help students learn to use storytelling appropriately as a way to strengthen their thinking and their writing inside—and outside—the academy. Far from viewing narrative as somehow inferior or subservient to academic discourse, which is often seen as more complex, the author invokes recent scholarship in evolutionary biology, which suggests that the predilection to tell stories lies at the heart of what distinguishes us as human beings. As the university becomes more diverse, it is essential to welcome more voices—and more stories—into the academic conversation.

KEYWORDS: storytelling; narrative; personal writing; academic discourse; rhetorical dexterity; translingualism

The question of the relationship between storytelling and academic discourse is one that has dominated much of my thinking, teaching, and research over the years. Although this is an issue of relevance to us as professionals seeking validation in the scholarly community, to say nothing of more tangible assets such as publication, tenure, and promotion, the discussion that follows will focus primarily on the implications of these varying modes of discourse not in our own scholarly work but for the students we teach—students in basic or ESL writing courses, community college students, first-generation college students—all of the students for whom what is commonly referred to as "academic discourse" is something of a foreign language.

Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk, *Professor Emerita of English at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, currently serves as Faculty Consultant to the CUNY Pipeline Program for Careers in College Teaching and Research.*

Personal and Academic Writing: A Career-Long Exploration

I first became fascinated with the stories students tell when I was working as an adjunct, teaching noncredit ESL writing courses at CUNY's Hunter College in the 1980s. The students, most of them fairly recent immigrants, had come from all over the world, and they had many stories to tell, stories originating in cultures and communities that came alive on the page as the students began to discover the power their words could have in this new language. Steven Haber, another adjunct at Hunter who had recently completed an MFA in creative writing, was also impressed by the students' stories, and we often met in the office while making copies of student writing that we valued and used in our teaching. Recognizing our shared interest, Steve and I made an appointment to meet and talk further. At the end of this conversation, Steve said, "It sounds as if we're talking about a textbook that uses student writing instead of essays by famous writers." This idea appealed to both of us, and we started to work on developing a proposal for a new kind of writing textbook.

Through a series of serendipitous events, we found a publisher who shared this vision, and we signed a contract to produce the book. The early chapters, which included the students' stories describing important people, places, and experiences in their lives, came together easily. In fact, it was difficult to decide which student essays to include since we had so many compelling pieces to choose from. But our editor at the time wasn't quite as enthusiastic as we were about how well the book was progressing. She warned, "These chapters featuring narrative writing are nice, but your book will only succeed if the later chapters, the ones focused on academic writing, are very strong. That is what teachers want. That is what they need if their students are to succeed in college."

As we talked about the need to strengthen the section of the book that we eventually called "more formal writing," the editor became interested in learning more about what writing teachers had in mind when they spoke of academic writing. She began to ask every professor she met as she traveled around the country, "What does academic writing mean to you?" Her conclusion? "Every professor knows what academic writing means, and it means something different to each of them."

At this time, I had just entered a Ph.D. program in applied linguistics at New York University, and I began to focus much of my reading and thinking on the same question, which became the subject of my first national conference presentation, "Personal and Academic Writing: A False Dichotomy?"

This talk, which I gave at the TESOL conference in San Francisco in March of 1990, was well received and evolved into my first published article, entitled "Is There a Difference Between Personal and Academic Writing?" In this article, I explored my understandings of this question based on my reading and thinking at the time, concluding that there really is a difference between what most scholars then referred to as "personal" and "academic" writing even though the two modes often merged into and supported one another. At this early stage of my career, I was inclined to agree with the nineteenth-century philosopher and psychologist, William James, who professed: "To say that all human thinking is essentially of two kinds—reasoning on the one hand, and narrative, descriptive, contemplative thinking on the other—is to say only what every reader's experience will corroborate" (qtd. in Bruner, *Actual Minds*, xiii).

In order to illustrate how storytelling—or narrative—differs from what we usually call "academic discourse," I have included the beginnings of two student essays that exemplify some of these differences. Both essays deal with the same general topic—the Chinese Cultural Revolution of 1966 to 1977. The first essay is a narrative written by one of the ESL students I taught at Hunter College in the early 1980s. When I gave the open-ended assignment to write an essay describing an experience that was important in your life, Xiao Mei Sun knew immediately what she wanted to write about—her family's experience during the Cultural Revolution. The resulting essay, entitled "Exodus," begins with Mei sitting in her apartment in Brooklyn after her immigration to the United States. The keys she describes in the first paragraph are the keys to her family's apartment in Nanjing, China.

> I was standing by my desk looking for a book. When I pulled out the last drawer and searched down to the bottom of it, a small box appeared in front of me. I opened it and saw a set of keys inside. They looked familiar, but at the same time they were so strange. Holding the keys, some long-locked memories flooded into my mind, as if they had been released by the keys. I sank slowly into the chair. It was raining outside. The room was so quiet that I could hear the rain pattering on the windowpanes. My thoughts returned to another rainy day.

> There were several knocks on my bedroom door. "Wake up, my dear," Mother's soft voice floated into my ears. "We need time to get everything done." I opened my eyes and muttered some

sound to let her know I was awake. It was dim outside, though it was past daybreak. I turned my body; the hard "bed" beneath suddenly reminded me that I was sleeping on the floor. The only thing between me and the hard, cold boards was a thin blanket. I looked around the empty room and remembered that the day before we had sent most of our furniture and belongings to the Nanjing Railway Station, where they would be transferred to Paoying County—a poor, rural place where we were being forced to go. I heard Mother say something again and realized that I had to get up immediately. Suddenly, I loved the "bed" so much that I didn't want to leave. It seemed softer and warmer than the bed I used to sleep in. I clung to the floor as tears rolled down my face. I wished I could sleep there for the rest of my life instead of going to that strange place. I sighed deeply, wiped my face, and got up.[1] (Mlynarczyk and Haber 42)

The excerpt that appears below explores the same topic using a different approach. This is the first paragraph of a student presentation (written by a group of students working together) on the topic of "The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" and posted on the Internet:

The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was a ten-year political campaign with objectives to revolutionize china with the cultural and political ideologies of Mao Zedong. Mao Zedong launched the Great Leap Forward in 1959, which was a complete disaster. To help bring China out of the economic depression caused by the Great Leap Forward, Mao Zedong began the Cultural Revolution in Beijing, China and it lasted from 1966-1976. (The Cultural Revolution) The goal of the Cultural Revolution was to steer China away from the lines of the Soviet model and into its own form of government. (The Cultural Revolution) Mao thus ultimately adopted four goals for the Cultural Revolution. They were to replace his designated successors with leaders more faithful to his current thinking; To rectify the Chinese Communist Party; To provide China's youths with a revolutionary experience and lastly, to achieve some specific policy changes so as to make the educational, health care, and cultural systems less elitist (The Cultural Revolution). During this time, thousands were killed and millions of people were imprisoned or exiled. In our presentation, we will discuss how the Cultural Revolution began, the advantages, disadvantages and

the effects it had on China during this time. ("Essay on the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution")

I suspect that most readers would share my sense that these two pieces of writing are quite different in style and content. If we had to choose which is more compelling, we would probably choose the first, Xiao Mei Sun's personal account of her family's experiences during the Cultural Revolution. But if we were asked which is closer to what is meant by "academic writing," we would be more likely to choose the second, the expository account of the reasons for and goals of this period in Chinese history.

In my early attempts to articulate the differences between these different approaches to writing, the narrative, or storytelling, approach of the first excerpt and the more formal, expository style of the second, the scholar who was most influential in my thinking was the psychologist Jerome Bruner. In his 1986 book *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, Bruner distinguishes two basic and different approaches to thinking and writing. The first, which he calls the "narrative mode," attempts to be evocative and delights in particulars. Not surprisingly, the typical example of this mode is, according to Bruner, the story. The second type, which he calls the "logico-scientific or paradigmatic mode," seeks general truths and attempts to convince others. This mode is exemplified by "the argument," whether in speech or writing.

The approach to writing that has traditionally been preferred in the academy is the second type, Bruner's "logico-scientific mode." This preference is based on the idea, still commonly accepted in many disciplines even in this postmodern, poststructuralist era, that knowledge is generated through logical reasoning or empirical studies of phenomena that can be directly observed and measured rather than apprehended through intuition or introspection. Thus, the kind of writing that has been privileged in the academy is writing that attempts to articulate general truths and to support these truths with evidence that can be shared.

Despite the preference for more distanced, less personal approaches to writing, the question of the role of narrative writing, of storytelling, within the academy, particularly its role within composition courses, has refused to go away. In the early 2000s, I found myself being drawn back into these questions, and I began by re-examining the influential debates about the relative merits of "personal" or "academic" writing between Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae, which took place in the late 1980s and 1990s. In these conversations, which were eventually published (Elbow, "Being"; Bartholomae, "Writing"), the two scholars defended very different approaches

to first-year composition, with Elbow favoring "personal, expressive" writing based on the student's own experiences and Bartholomae arguing for more traditional "academic" writing based on critical reading of key texts. Considering these debates from the perspective of someone who had taught developmental writing for many years, I understood Bartholomae's point that teachers need to help students demystify the kinds of writing they are asked to do in college. But I also felt that Elbow's type of expressive writing had an important role to play in helping students acquire the kind of academic discourse that Bartholomae valued.

The research I had done for my dissertation and subsequent book on the reflective journal writing of multilingual students (Mlynarczyk, *Conversations*) supported my belief that teachers of students who have not previously developed proficiency in academic discourse need to help students bridge the gap between their own stories and opinions and the more distanced type of writing required for many college courses. One way of doing this is to ask students to explore their ideas first in an ungraded reflective journal before moving on to write about these ideas in the more distanced form often required for college courses. In concluding my 2006 article, I wrote, "I believe that students cannot write a strong and convincing argument unless they have first grappled with their subject in a deeply personal way" ("Personal and Academic" 23). This is a belief I still hold today and one I will explore in the next section.

Where We Are Now

Despite the dramatic changes in technology and, hence, in what counts as writing in the past twenty-five years, the type of writing that is expected and rewarded in most college courses is still closer to the traditional academic argument than to a narrative approach based on the telling of stories. The Common Core curriculum standards in English and mathematics, which were released in 2010 and adopted by a majority of states, not only reflect this continuing preference but may be contributing to it in significant ways. For example, even in the early grades, the Common Core emphasizes the need to increase the amount of *nonfiction* reading students are asked to do, which is seen by the developers of these standards as more "complex" than fiction. To be in compliance with the new standards, teachers from kindergarten through fifth grade need to achieve "a 50-50 balance between informational and literary reading" (National Governors Association). In writing, as well as reading, the emphasis is shifting away from personal or

narrative writing and toward argumentation. The section of the Common Core website entitled "Key Shifts in English Language Arts" articulates the reasons for this change:

> Frequently, forms of writing in K–12 have drawn heavily from student experience and opinion, which alone will not prepare students for the demands of college, career, and life. Though the standards still expect narrative writing throughout the grades, they also expect a command of sequence and detail that are essential for effective argumentative and informative writing. The standards' focus on evidence-based writing along with the ability to inform and persuade is a significant shift from current practice. (National Governors Association)

This increased emphasis on argumentation and "evidence-based writing" seems ironic in today's world where personal experience and personal stories are constantly celebrated in social media and on reality TV. What does it mean for us in the academy that much (in some cases, most) of the writing students have done before they arrived on our campuses consisted of texting and composing on Twitter, Facebook, and other social media platforms?

Perhaps this is just another manifestation of the disconnect that students experience between their own private worlds and the world of the university with its preference for an "academic" approach. Of course, some students arrive at college comfortable with and proficient in academic discourse. They often come from affluent and well-educated families and have attended academically oriented high schools where this type of language was the norm for school assignments. But for many, perhaps for most students placed in basic writing or ESL courses, academic discourse can feel like a foreign language. Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron capture the sense of the divide between the language of the school (in this case, the language of the French secondary school and university) and the language of students' homes, a disconnect that can have a chilling effect on students:

> The divorce between the language of the family and the language of school only serves to reinforce the feeling that the education system belongs to another world, and that what teachers have to say has nothing to do with daily life because spoken in a language which makes it unreal. . . . This rift extends across all dimensions of life, from central areas of interest to the very words in which these are discussed; and it can be lived only with a sense of dualism or in

a state of resigned submission to being excluded. (9)

Although these words were written in 1965, they still ring true fifty years later. Most students who are placed in basic writing or ESL courses at the college level have come to view their home languages as a liability. During my years teaching basic and ESL writing at the City University of New York, I usually asked students to fill out a brief questionnaire on the first day of class. One of the questions was "What is your home language?" Every semester a surprising number of students answered this question with the phrase "broken English." Clearly, these students had gotten the message that their home language, their mother tongue, was "broken," not at all suitable for use in the academy. If this attitude finds support in the courses that students take, if teachers insist that students begin by writing only "academic discourse," that they should never use the word "I" in an essay, that their stories and their languages are not appropriate in college, they will get a very clear and discouraging message: Your language is not valued here, and your stories don't belong.

Laura Rendón, a woman who worked her way up from poverty through community college, eventually earning a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor and embarking on a successful career in academia (she is currently a professor of educational leadership and policy studies at the University of Texas, San Antonio), emphasizes how important it is for students to find a connection between their stories, their languages, their worlds, and the world of the academy. In an article entitled "From the Barrio to the Academy: Revelations of a Mexican American 'Scholarship Girl,' " she writes:

> What connects me to my past is what gives me my identity—my command of the Spanish language, the focus of my research, my old friends, and my heritage. What makes Laura Rendón an individual is not only who she is now but what happened to her along the way. What gives me strength is my newfound ability to trust and follow my own natural style and to encourage others to do the same. (60)

How can we encourage our students to develop this kind of trust in their own language and their natural style, which was so important to Laura Rendón, as they work to become more comfortable and more successful in the work, the words, and the world of the academy?

While we certainly cannot change the academy's longstanding preference for the more distanced approach to language commonly known as academic discourse, we, as professors of developmental or ESL courses, professors in community colleges, professors teaching first-generation college students, can set a different tone and control the expectations for language use within our own classrooms. Working with others, we can encourage programs and curricula that view the students' home languages as valuable resources rather than liabilities.

How Do We Take into Account the Linguistic and Cultural Diversity of Our Students as We Bring Academic Discourse into Our Classrooms?

This question, from the Call for Proposals for the 2014 Conference on Language, Society, and Culture at Bronx Community College on which this special issue of *JBW* is based, is a crucial one for the readers of this journal. Instead of viewing students' home discourses as liabilities that need to be "corrected," we can welcome and value them as important resources, a form of enrichment, that will help the students in their quest to acquire a further education and to become contributors to the making of knowledge within the academy. This attitude of openness toward linguistic difference is in keeping with a recently articulated concept in composition studies that argues for "translingualism," an approach that recognizes, even celebrates, the vast variety of forms and functions of language. In a 2011 opinion piece in *College English*, Bruce Horner, Min-Zhan Lu, Jacqueline Jones Royster, and John Trimbur advocate a translingual approach that "insists on viewing language differences and fluidities as resources to be preserved, developed, and utilized" (304). While the scholars who advocate translingualism do not specifically discuss storytelling and its possible place in the academy, the model they advocate—the traffic model of literacy as opposed to the archipelago model (Horner 12-16)—is one that recognizes the fluidity of languages and the ways in which language use cannot be easily compartmentalized as, for example, business English as opposed to the English of engineering or the English of psychology (Horner 14-15). In essence, a translingual approach to language is one that minimizes or even ignores an either/or approach to storytelling vs. "academic discourse." This view of language as a living, ever-changing reality is one that eliminates the need to prescribe a particular form of discourse for our students.

Rather than teaching "academic discourse" as a discrete and omnipresent language form used in colleges and universities, we need to help students recognize the flexibility of language, even within the academy, and the constant need to adapt language use to specific times and places. In other words, we need to help students develop "rhetorical dexterity" as Shannon Carter has theorized the task: "The ultimate goal of rhetorical dexterity is to develop the ability to effectively read, understand, manipulate, and negotiate the cultural and linguistic codes of a new community of practice based on a relatively accurate assessment of another, more familiar one" (80).

Working with students in basic writing courses, Carter begins by having students analyze the language practices of a community they know well—for example, high school football or a specific religious community—and then apply these principles as they come to understand the unspoken rules of new discourse communities including the ones they will encounter in the university. This view of discourse and literacy as fluid and adaptable rather than as "autonomous" and unchanging (Street 1-2) offers opportunities for students to draw upon the literacies and languages they bring with them into the classroom—including the resources of their oral language—as they and we "reimagine" what academic discourse could become (Carter 151).

An excellent example of welcoming students' linguistic and cultural diversity as resources as they work to become more proficient in the languages of the academy is the learning community program at Bronx Community College described by Andrea Parmegiani in his article in this issue. Parmegiani and his colleagues were uncomfortable basing their new program on the idea that these students, all of whom shared Spanish as their home language, were somehow lacking in basic skills and prior knowledge. Instead, they reasoned, "Taking the time to understand the knowledge and skills students bring to our classrooms and how they differ from the skills and knowledge that are required to succeed academically is a much more productive starting place to begin to remove systemic barriers to academic success" (28).

The learning community (Gabelnick et al.; Hanson and Heller) they ultimately designed valued the students' home discourses in a tangible way. In addition to taking the required, non-credit ESL composition course (taught by Parmegiani), students took a first-year seminar (also taught by Parmegiani), and a Spanish class for native speakers (taught by a professor from the modern languages department but attended by Parmegiani). This was a conscious way of valuing the students' home language while at the same time strengthening their academic competence in Spanish. The fact

that the ESL composition professor sat in on the Spanish course—a course in which his students' skills were superior to his own—sent a powerful message. Your home language is welcome in the academy, and there are areas where students, even those placed in developmental courses, know more than their professors. This program design was based on a strong belief that learning should be "bidirectional"; students learn from teachers, but teachers must also learn from their students. Although Parmegiani himself is multilingual, he was not as proficient in Spanish as his students were. Thus, he explains: "In order to participate [in the Spanish course] I had to turn to my students as experts in order to fill *my* lexical gaps" (43).

Another benefit of having the ESL professor attend the Spanish class was that it helped him to empathize with his students' feelings of inadequacy when faced with an unfamiliar language and cultural expectations. He describes this experience as "Discursive loss," which increased his empathy for his students' feelings when faced with academic English in the college classroom. Gradually, Parmegiani's competence in Spanish increased, leading to other feelings, which he openly discussed with his students: "Exposing both my vulnerability and my capability as a language learner was crucial for building trust and creating a safe space where students were comfortable enough to bring their own struggle with language and literacy into our Academic Discourse" (44). This type of "bidirectionality" between students and their professors is all too rare in the academy, but it is a powerful force for learning and one that is likely to enhance students' academic success, an undeniable feature of this educational experiment at Bronx Community College.

The idea of validating and rewarding students for their proficiency in other languages and dialects is not a new one. In order to achieve a Ph.D., scholars are required to demonstrate proficiency in other languages. In today's global economy, knowledge of other languages is increasingly valued in the upper echelons of society. Upwardly mobile parents are enrolling their children in bilingual preschools and language immersion programs (Pergament) and seeking out nannies who agree to speak another language to their children (Anderson). For these families, speaking an additional language is seen as a valuable form of cultural and linguistic capital. But students classified as basic writers are often made to feel ashamed of their Spanish dominance or their "broken English." This is destructive to learning as Gloria Anzaldúa observes when she states, "Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language I cannot take pride in myself" (59). It's time that we, in the academy, find

ways to value and validate as resources the many languages and dialects that students—all students—bring with them to the university.

What Are Some Points of Contact Between Stories and Academic Discourse, and How Can These Connections Benefit Our Students?

This question, also from the Call for Proposals for the 2014 Conference on Language, Society, and Culture, assumes that stories, like other languages and dialects, can be important resources within the academy, an assumption I completely accept. Thus, it becomes important to ask how we can help students use storytelling effectively in their writing. Before I begin to address this question, however, I would like to mention a problem we might encounter as we encourage students to explore points of contact between storytelling and academic discourse. Carmen Kynard, a well-known composition scholar and a professor at CUNY's John Jay College, observed that the black female students in her classes were reluctant to write about topics that made them "feel," in other words, topics that caused them to experience deep emotion. Writing about these subjects for school made them uncomfortable, and they resisted doing it. They seemed to have learned only too well the lesson that these types of stories do not belong in the academy, that strong emotion should not be a part of academic discourse. Kynard has worked hard, using innovative pedagogical approaches, to break through this resistance in order to find a way to help her students see that some of our most powerful thinking and writing happens when we allow ourselves to "feel." However, as we work to encourage storytelling in the academy, we need to constantly remind ourselves to be sensitive to students' possible discomfort with sharing personal and emotion-filled stories in our classes.

We also need to remember that taking advantage of these points of contact between storytelling and academic discourse does not happen without a great deal of thought and care on the part of the teacher and a great deal of effort on the part of the students. Thus, I share Amy Robillard's concern that writing teachers need to foster "a more complex pedagogy of the narrative" (91), one that "make[s] explicit the dependence of analysis and argument on narrative, and vice versa" (91).

This kind of interweaving of narrative and analysis is encouraged in the Bronx Community College learning community program mentioned earlier. In this program, literacy narratives "blur the boundaries between what is personal and what is academic by allowing students to join criti-

cal conversations about language, identity, structural power relations, and agency while examining their life experience in conjunction with other texts" (Parmegiani 37). Key to this process is the careful way the work is scaffolded and socially constructed within the learning community as students explore their own histories of literacy and relate them to the kinds of literacy they are encountering in college.

A similar kind of work with literacy narratives is being done at Our Lady of the Lake University, an HSI (Hispanic Serving Institution) in San Antonio, Texas. This program, which received the 2014 Innovation Award for the Teaching of Basic Writing from the Council on Basic Writing,[2] replaced the previous non-credit ESL course, which used a skills and drill approach in which students "progressed" from sentence to paragraph to essay, with a new approach in which students take regular credit-bearing composition while receiving extra support. The curriculum begins with an autobiographical literacy narrative and includes a series of writings that grow out of this original assignment, culminating in a persuasive essay in which students explore solutions to problems they have uncovered in earlier assignments. As with the program at Bronx Community College and Shannon Carter's program to promote rhetorical dexterity, this one helps students "gain a better understanding of the discourse communities to which [they] belong, the literacies [they] own, and the ways [they] can use that knowledge to succeed as [they] experience new college/department/degree discourse communities" (Zepeda). By beginning with the stories of the students' own experiences with literacy, programs such as these help to ground students in what they know best, their own experiences, as they move toward the more distanced analysis that is so often rewarded in the academy.

It is not only students who can benefit from such approaches. Mike Rose, an influential scholar in the field of basic writing with a background in cognitive psychology, has long sensed the power of stories when writing in and for the academy. In his widely read book *Lives on the Boundary*, he weaves together stories of specific students, including his earlier self, in analyzing the problems that underprepared students face, and sometimes overcome, in their attempts to succeed in the university. In a blog post written in 2014, Rose comments on his intentional use of vignettes—stories—in his scholarly writing. In explicating topics related to education, sociology, and psychology, Rose blends the more distanced analysis of the scientist with a more "anthropological" description of the people affected by the social phenomena he is discussing. He explains his writing process: ". . . along with the use of multiple disciplines, I attempt to blend genres, to weave together

analysis with narrative, descriptive detail with exposition." Having used this method for many years, Rose is convinced that stories are a crucial part of his own style of academic discourse, strengthening the power of his words substantially:

> These vignettes are set within a discussion of the history and sociology of underpreparation in higher education. I think that embedding such vignettes into an examination of the conditions that lead to them gives a conceptually more substantial account of underpreparation than would vignette or disciplinary analysis alone. ("Writing about Inequality")

Surely, Mike Rose has come to an acceptable answer in his own writing to the question concerning the "points of contact between stories and academic discourse." The possibilities for encouraging students to develop similar "points of contact" in their writing are practically unlimited in this digital age.

One scholar who advocates encouraging students to use digital resources in the composition classroom is Adam Banks, the 2015 chair of the Conference on College Composition and Communication. In *Digital Griots: African American Rhetoric in a Multimedia Age*, Banks not only extols the importance of digital composing but also illuminates the crucial role of storytelling in black rhetorical traditions. Scholars of composition and rhetoric have been aware of these traditions at least since 1977, when Geneva Smitherman published *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*. Banks has updated this discussion for an age where the ancient art of storytelling has been enriched by access to digital media. According to Banks, the griots, or storytellers, have long held a position of importance in African and African American rhetorical traditions. He describes them as

> the figures who are entrusted to tell the story and, through the practices they employ in recording, preserving, sharing, and even masking the knowledge of those stories, useful figures on which to base an African American rhetoric for a multimedia age that might ensure that new realities do not erase those "ancient rivers" that Langston Hughes reminds us connect young people to elders and ancestors and the Mississippi to the Euphrates, Nile, and Congo. (17)

Recent research in fields such as neuroscience, cognitive psychology, and evolutionary biology supports Banks's description of stories as "ancient rivers" connected to "elders and ancestors." Writing in 2014, the eminent

biologist Edward O. Wilson explains that a key characteristic of human beings' evolutionary success relates to their penchant for telling stories. Humans have evolved a phenomenal memory that enables them to judge the intentions of others and to make predictions of future scenarios: "We instinctively delight in the telling of countless stories about others, cast as players upon our own inner stage" (22). Viewed from this perspective, it is not difficult to understand the deep-seated appeal of today's social media. According to Wilson, the sharp social intelligence of human beings developed as the cerebral cortex evolved:

> Gossip, celebrity worship, biographies, novels, war stories, and sports are the stuff of modern culture because a state of intense, even obsessive concentration on others has always enhanced survival of individuals and groups. We are devoted to stories because that is how the mind works—a never-ending wandering through past scenarios and through alternative scenarios of the future. (43)

From an evolutionary perspective, stories are at the very heart of what distinguishes us as human beings. We think in stories. Thus, it would be misguided to attempt to banish them from academic discourse. Writing in a 2003 special issue of *College English* focused on "The Personal in Academic Writing," Amy Robillard defends the use of stories in academic discourse. Focusing particularly on the ways in which stories can help students articulate their relationship to social class, she asks writing teachers to "make more explicit in our own classrooms the ways that narrative and the more privileged genres of analysis and argument interanimate one another" (77). As concerned teachers and scholars, the challenge is to help students learn to use storytelling appropriately as a way to strengthen their thinking and their writing inside—and outside—the academy.

Coda: A Final Word on the Need for Stories in the Academy

In concluding, I find myself going back to Jerome Bruner, the scholar whose work on narrative was influential in my early investigations of storytelling and academic discourse. At the end of his 2003 book entitled *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life*, Bruner explains that he has grown increasingly dissatisfied with his previously articulated comparative schema in which he categorized discourse as either "paradigmatic or logico-scientific" (Bruner's term for academic discourse) or "narrative." Although he still uses these terms, he states that he no longer sees the two as diametrically opposed.

Instead, his interest has shifted to a new question: "How can we translate from one world of mind to the other?" (101). He asserts that it's essential to use storytelling—narrative—*along with* academic discourse and cautions, "it is when we lose sight of the two in league that our lives narrow" (102).

Bruner goes on to praise the groundbreaking work of Shirley Brice Heath, who, in her 1983 book, *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms*, documented how the students in the two different communities she studied (the middle-class white children of "Roadville" and the lower-class black children of "Trackton") used language. With the very different discourses that were encouraged in their families and communities—the fanciful, storytelling approach of the black children and the more restrained, factual approach of the white children—they were actually creating different versions of reality. Bruner suggests that "we come to conceive of a 'real world' in a manner that fits the stories we tell about it" (103). What is important, according to Bruner, is encouraging a diversity of stories: "The tyranny of the single story surely led our forebears to guarantee freedom of expression. . . . Let many stories bloom" (103).

Our students are invaluable sources of this kind of diversity. And it will enrich not only their lives but our institutions as well if we encourage them to tell these stories in the university as ways of supporting and enlarging the scope of academic discourse.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. This essay by Xiao Mei Sun was awarded a Bedford Prize in Student Writing. It was later reprinted in *In Own Words* (Mlynarczyk and Haber, 2005).
2. The Innovation Award is presented annually by the Council on Basic Writing (CBW) to a program judged to improve the success of basic writing students through new and effective practices that have the potential to be disseminated to other institutions.

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