Where Have You Been? Where Are You Going?: Reconsidering Literacy Narratives in the Context of Neuroscience Research

Irene Clark

Abstract

This article argues that literacy narratives should be viewed as an important genre in composition courses, and in other courses as well, because they can help students consider and reconsider who they were, who they are, and who they want to become, both as individuals and as members of a culture or community. Engaging with neuroscience scholarship, critical race theory, and counter story, it maintains that recalling "stories" of literacy acquisition can provide students with transformative insight into educational inequities, entrenched power structures, and challenges that may have impacted their previous involvements with literacy. Because writing a literacy narrative involves reflection about previous "scripts" associated with literacy and education, it is a genre that can be enlightening for all students, those from privileged as well as from disadvantaged backgrounds, enabling them to critique the cultural, political, and social forces that have impacted their educational experiences and to replace damage-centered scripts and traumas with affirming insights and plans. The article utilizes current research in neuroplasticity to provide support for this perspective, in that it demonstrates that different identities are manifested in the brain. Examples of students' work are included.[1]

> *In order to enter this particular literary community, I had to first give up a huge part of myself. Now, as I grow and come to fruition as a writer, I feel encouraged to find a way to rediscover and utilize those passionate parts of myself that I previously worked so hard to suppress.*
>
> —Enrique Solis, "Delving into a New World," (p. 301)

> *I realized how different my family was from the average American family . . . but two months later, my mom signed my sister and me up for a free after-school computer course and got us each a library card, ensuring that her children never had to go through that again.*
>
> —Charlie

> *Reflecting on this experience, I have come to realize that Black identities are subtly informed and solidified through schooling and education.*
>
> —Joseph

> *The autobiography narrative paper prepared me to choose the path of being a financial planner. While I was writing the paper, I realized that I was passionate toward this career so that someday I could be a financial advisor and assist clients to reach their financial goals.*
>
> —Raphael

The above statements, written by students who were enrolled in a course I taught several times titled "Literacy, Rhetoric and Culture," testify to the insights students can obtain when they write literacy narratives. They also provide support for the theme I will develop in this article––that literacy narratives should be considered an important genre in composition courses, and in other courses as well, because they can help students consider and reconsider who they were, who they are, and who they want to become, both as individuals and as members of a culture or community. Because many writing programs are currently grappling with issues concerned with linguistic and social justice in their curricula, it is an especially important time for the discipline of writing studies to recognize that the reflective awareness of past experiences that is generated in writing a literacy narrative can help students critique the cultural, political, and social forces that have impacted their educational experiences, realize that "literacy can both liberate and oppress" (Vieira et al., 2019, p. 37), and consider "how they might alter such a pattern" (Williams, 2003, p. 343). Engaging with neuroscience scholarship, critical race theory, and counterstory, this article will discuss the transformative power of literacy narratives and argue that they can enable student writers, those from privileged as well as from disadvantaged backgrounds, to replace damage-centered scripts and traumas with affirming insights and plans.

Development of My Perspective on Literacy Narratives

As the Director of Composition at a large, public, Hispanic serving university, I teach a variety of undergraduate and graduate rhetoric/composition courses, prepare graduate students to teach first-year writing classes, observe writing instructors, and serve on several committees concerned with the teaching of writing. When I first assumed this position, my approach to

writing pedagogy was characterized by a strong emphasis on thesis-driven argument that, I still maintain, is important for students to learn. As Gerald Graff (2003) asserted in *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind*, most academic writing involves some form of what he refers to as "arguespeak" (p. 22). Many students remain clueless, Graff maintained, because they are unaware that "all academics, despite their many differences, play a version of the same game of persuasive argument" (p. 22). Graff cited a list of common persuasive practices inventoried by compositionists such as Mike Rose (1989), who wrote in *Lives on the Boundary,* that it was important for students to be given practice in "framing an argument, analyzing someone else's argument . . . applying a theory to disparate phenomena, and so on" (p. 188). These were goals that I strongly endorsed when I assumed my position as composition director. I did not disdain narratives of any kind, and some instructors continued to assign them—but I viewed them as "extra" assignments.

I still emphasize argument in my writing classes. Nevertheless, over the past several years, I have come to appreciate the importance of assigning literacy narratives—in first-year writing classes, in upper division classes, and in graduate classes––because I have found that this assignment enables students "to explore and reflect on their past experiences with language, schooling, education, and/or learning to better understand how these encounters have formed them into the literate beings they are today" (Alexander, 2015, p. 43). They have the potential to foster students with a sense of agency, providing them with the confidence to undertake other genres of writing, even those with which they are unfamiliar.

The impetus for this change in my perspective occurred when I was involved in developing an undergraduate minor in Writing and Rhetoric that included a new core course titled "Literacy, Rhetoric, and Culture." The new minor was launched in 2008, and when l taught the new course, I assigned a literacy narrative and discovered that many students found the assignment both enjoyable and meaningful. Since that time, I have continued to assign literacy narratives in most of my classes, and I have always found them valuable for all students, but particularly for those who are new to post-secondary education. Writing in this genre allows students to reflect on their past experiences with language, schooling, education, and/or learning, thereby enabling them to construct potentially new "selves" as they grappled with the multiple demands of the academy.

Literacy Narrative Scholarship: An Overview

Literacy narratives, although not new to writing studies scholarship, are not as frequently assigned as are personal narratives on a variety of subjects. In the early days of the process movement, personal writing was regarded as an important approach for helping novice writers find their "voice," and become "writers," a perspective that is often associated with the work of Peter Elbow, Mike Rose and Donald Murray, among others. The focus was not on literacy or language acquisition, although those topics were frequently addressed. Rather, the idea was that students would be most engaged with subject matter concerned with their own lives, would discover a personal "voice," and could write about something that they understood better than their teacher. The goal was for students to write authentically and develop confidence. In "Being a writer vs. Being an Academic," Elbow (1995) argued that having students write from a personal perspective enabled students to present a world view approached from their own perspective.

As the history of rhetorical discourse has established, however, encouraging students to write about personal experiences was not always considered valuable. As Robert Connors' (1987) discussed in "Personal Writing Assignments," classical rhetoric was a public discipline that emphasized outwardly directed, objective, impersonal speech, the goal being to examine and argue questions that "could be shared by all members of the polity" (p. 167). Reviewing the perspectives of several classical rhetoricians, Connors explained that classical rhetoric was not concerned with individual experiences and personal expression, a view that persisted until the latter part of the 18th century, when personal opinion, particularly in the context of making judgments on literary works, began to gain importance. Connors maintained that this shift contributed to the relatively rapid movement toward Romantic thought in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, leading eventually to the increased acceptance of personal feelings and the need to write out of actual experience, which characterized the early days of the process movement. Nevertheless, as teachers and scholars in the field of Writing Studies know, even during those days and certainly at the present time, other genres of writing such as exposition, library research, thesis driven argument, and literary analysis have continued to be viewed as important in first-year writing courses—in some departments considered more valuable than personal writing of any kind. Moreover, determining which writing genres should be privileged in a first-year writing course is additionally complicated by the increased importance of multimodality and visual rhetoric.

The Transformative Potential of Narrative: Insights from Neuroscientific Research

The question of whether first year writing classes should include literacy narratives continues to generate debate. However, an additional perspective on this topic is provided by recent scholarship in neuroscience, in particular, work in neuroplasticity that indicates the brain can change frequently and experiences and changes in one's sense of self can be detected in the brain through advanced imaging techniques (Clark, 2016; Cozolino, 2013; Greenfield, 2016; Seung, 2012). As neuroscientist Susan Greenfield (2016) explained, experiences can be viewed in terms of narrative or stories, similar to how we understand fiction, and when we play different roles within these stories, "differing cerebral blood flow" that is associated with "different personality states" (p. 34) can be detected. Similarly, as Brian Crawford (2024) has pointed out in his recently published book, *Emotional Value in the Composition Classroom: Self, Agency, and Neuroplasticity*, "modern neuroscience has expanded our understanding of the neural and bodily correlates which comprise the foundations of self" (p. 15), which are in a continuous state of becoming. Crawford notes that whereas "in Composition, we often speak of rhetorical selves . . . in modern neuroscience, the plasticity of self—a protagonist constructed to best anticipate threats and satisfy desires in changing environments—is essentially identical" (p. 9).

This perpetual state of becoming and the potential fluidity of identity was discussed in Clark's (2015) "Genre, Identity, and the Brain, Insights from Neuropsychology," which argued that "identity is not an essentialized or static construct" (p. 1), that it "can be understood in terms of performativity" (p. 1), and that it can be affected by one's experiences and insights. Because writing a literacy narrative often permits students to view themselves as the heroes of their own stories, the process of developing material can help them realize how much agency they already have had in their lives, realize that identity can be altered by what one does or performs, recognize possibilities for choice, and give them confidence to move ahead.

This alteration in identity as a result of performance and/or experience can now, in many instances, be detected in the brain in a mutually generative relationship—that is, everything that we do and think affects the brain, which correspondingly affects what we do and think. As argued by Satel and Lilienfeld (2013),

> everything the brain enables us to do—feel, think, perceive, and act—is linked, or correlated, with changes in oxygen consumption and regional blood flow in the brain. When a person responds to a task, such as looking at photos or solving a math problem, specific

> regions of the brain are typically engaged and receive more oxygen-laden, or oxygenized, blood. The increased blood flow and the boost in oxygen associated with it are proxies for increased activation of neurons. (p. 5)

A similar perspective on how experience and identity are manifested in the brain is discussed in the work of Sebastian Seung (2012), author of *Connectome: How the Brain's Wiring Makes Us Who We Are*. Seung, a professor at Princeton's Neuroscience Institute who uses techniques from machine learning and social computing to extract brain structure from light and electron microscopic images, maintained that identity is linked to what he referred to as a "Connectome," which he defined as "the totality of connections between the neurons in a nervous system" (p. xiv). Seung argued that "minds differ because connectomes differ" (p. xiv) and that a person's "connectome changes throughout life," (p. xv) influenced by experience. This perspective is in accord with the work of neuroscientist Susan Greenfield (2016), who discussed patients with a history of exposure to traumatic stress whose brains show smaller volumes of blood in the brain area related to memory (the hippocampus). Other examples cited by Greenfield are patients with multiple personality disorder, whose brain waves register differently according to the particular state they are in. Greenfield pointed out that a neural approach has been used to show what is happening in the brain during the experience of different identities.

These insights from current neuroscience research suggest that the transformative self-insights referenced in the epigraphs written by Enrique, Charlie, Joseph, and Raphael are likely to have parallel brain correlates. Enrique's narrative (Solis, 2016) concludes with his realization that in order to enter a new literary community, he first had to give up a huge part of himself—essentially, to write a new script for his performance in his classes. Joseph concludes his narrative with the realization that his view of himself as "black," rather than "creole," had been shaped by the limited perspectives of fellow high school students, enabling him to consider how he wished to view himself. Charlie's literacy narrative recounted his developing awareness that his family had faced challenges that were different from those of "the average American family" but also indicated his pride in having overcome those challenges and his recognition that his family had new choices. Raphael's letter, written after he had completed my class, demonstrated that the process of writing a literacy narrative had made him aware of a predilection for finance that he hadn't fully understood and enabled him to view himself as a potential financial advisor.

Processing Stories in the Brain

Current neuroscience research also indicates that stories are processed differently in the brain than other types of information and can contribute to the development of empathy. A study conducted at the University of Pennsylvania indicated that "personal stories are more consistently processed in the regions of the brain that help us understand what other people think and feel than other non-narrative types of messages" (Falk, 2021, p. A24). This perspective is supported by a neuroimaging study conducted by Grail, Tamborini, Weber, and Schmälzle (2021) to determine whether personal narratives engage the brains of audience members more than non-narrative messages and to investigate the brain regions that facilitate this effect (p. 332). The study indicated that "personal narratives elicited strong audience engagement as evidenced by robust correlations across participants frontal and parietal lobes compared to a non-personal control text" (p. 332). It provides further support for assigning literacy narratives in that it suggests that "listening to someone else's story can give us a new way of seeing the world, motivate us to care, teach values, and change minds," thereby enhancing understanding (Grall, Tamborini, Weber & Schmälzle, 2021, p. 332). As Falk (2021) notes in her conclusion,

> stories are one tool to help people stimulate and understand social experiences they've never personally gone through. Also, when people retell stories to others, listeners' brains reconstruct the same patterns that successful communicators originally had in mind. (p. A 24)

Mar (2011), in "The Neural Bases of Social Cognition and Story Comprehension," explained this phenomenon in terms of what happens in the brain, noting that fiction enhances imaginative thinking, because fictional words and stories activate neural processes that reflect real-world events that are similar to the story. Marco Iacoboni (2016) referred to this action in terms of "mirror neurons," which he asserted are relevant to our tendency to be empathetic:

> When I see you smiling, my mirror neurons for smiling fire up, and I get your state of mind right away. I feel it as you feel it. We need that mirroring in order to create a full empathic response to other people. (para. 5)

What is indicated here is that personal narrative strongly engages listeners' brains, suggesting that when people recall their own stories, similar engagement is likely to occur.

Recent Scholarly Interest in Literacy Narratives

Many teachers continue to assign literacy narratives in their classes. But people who are not enrolled in classes are writing them as well. As Delgado (1989) observed in "Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative," "everyone has been writing stories these days. And I don't just mean writing *about* stories or narrative theory, important as those are. I mean actual stories, as in 'once-upon-a-time type stories'" (p. 2411). Writing from the perspective of a legal scholar, Delgado characterized the writers of stories as "members of what could be loosely described as outgroups, groups whose marginality defines the boundaries of the mainstream, whose voice and perspective—whose consciousness—has been suppressed, devalued and abnormalized" (p. 2411).

More recently, Smith and Watson (2010) noted that "memoir and autobiographical writing have been gaining greater acceptance in the academy, not only those written by students, but by teachers and scholars as well" (p. 22). Moreover, they point out that the value of these narratives is not only because they have an impact on readers, but also, and perhaps more significantly, they often have a transformative effect on those who write them. What is often the case, they argue, is that memory researchers from fields as diverse as neuroscience, cognitive psychology, and philosophy have shown that

> remembering involves a reinterpretation of the past in the present. The process is not a passive one of mere retrieval from a memory bank. Rather, the remembering subject actively creates the meaning of the past in the act of remembering. (Smith & Watson, 2010, p. 22)

In the context of this article, the understanding that there is a connection between recalling and reinterpreting an event is important because it affirms the generative role of recalling the past and the potentially transformative impact that writing literacy narratives can have, not only on those who read or hear them, but also on the writers themselves. Such insights can provide awareness and understandings that can lead to an enhanced sense of agency. The scholarship of Mary Soliday (1994, 2002) points to the value of the literacy narrative in enabling students to "translate" private experiences into public discourse (*Politics of Remediation*, p. 150), situating the literacy narrative as a site of tension between the personal and the public. A similar perspective is offered by Christopher Minnix (2015), who views the literacy narrative as contributing to a public writing pedagogy that is positioned between a student's voice and academic discourse, as a genre that enables students to recognize the public significance of their personal experience. Minnix views the literacy narrative as a site "of continued

rhetorical invention and public engagement" (p. 24), helping students recognize the public significance of their personal experiences and opinions.

Critical Race Theory and Counterstory

The transformative potential of writing a literacy narrative is particularly relevant these days because it is in accord with the concept of counterstory, a significant component of critical race theory, which has been gaining increased attention. As defined by Delgado (1989), in "Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative," counterstory has the function of exposing the falseness of prevailing concepts of power and inequality that are based on the idea that inequality can be corrected by enforcing currently existing policies. This is a grossly oversimplified story which ignores the tendency of the dominant group to justify the world as it is—a world with whites on top and others at the bottom. The effect of counterstories is implicit in Patricia Williams' "On Being the Object of Property" (1988), in which she discusses how her mindset changed when her mother told her that law school was "in her blood" and that no one should make her "feel inferior because someone else's father was a judge" (p. 6). "Reclaiming that from which one has been disinherited is a good thing" (p.6), Williams argues, an insight that enabled her to gain agency—to view herself as being able to "counter" the status quo. More recently, Delgado, Stefancic, Chilton, and Harris (2017) discussed the power of story as a means of helping people from different races and cultures to understand one another. "Well told stories describing the reality of black and brown lives can help readers to bridge the gap between their worlds and those of others," they point out (p. 8-9), because "engaging stories can help us understand what life is like for others and invite the reader into a new and unfamiliar world" (p. 49). Moreover, they maintain, "powerfully written stories may begin a process of correction in our system of beliefs and categories by calling attention to neglected evidence and reminding readers of our common humanity" (p. 51).

Other examples of narratives that counter false cultural/societal beliefs include Jacqueline Jones Royster's "When the first Voice You Hear is Not Your Own" (1996), Villanueva's "On the Rhetoric and Precedents of Racism"(2007), Villanueva and Moeggenber's "A Tale of Two Generations (2018), and Aja Y. Martinez's *Counterstory: the Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory* (2020), which includes chapters about Richard Delgado, Derrick Bell, and Patricia Williams, whom she refers to as "*counterstory exemplars*" (p. 2). In the introduction to that book, Martinez recounts how valuable it was for her to read Derrick Bell's *And We Are Not Saved: The*

Elusive Quest for Racial Justice (1987) and *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (1989) when she was a graduate student because these works gave her the language and the confidence to reject "research that silences and distorts epistemologies of people of color" (p. 3). Martinez emphasizes the importance of using a range of methods such as family history, biography, autoethnography which "empower the minoritized through the formation of stories that disrupt the erasures embedded in standardized majoritarian methodologies" (p. 3).

A significant element within the critical race theory movement has been to validate the role of narrative inquiry, which uses individual experience as a primary data source. Both critical race theory and narrative inquiry utilize narrative as valid evidence. However, whereas critical race theory focuses on listeners and readers with the goal of motivating action, narrative inquiry conceptualizes the primary audience of narrative as the inquirers themselves. Stories that circulate within a cultural community, especially an oppressed community, are an important source of self-education and self-transformation, and thus have the capacity to transform experience. When accessed through writing a literacy narrative, these stories can enable students to reevaluate past experiences. Reflecting on their own experiences with literacy, they often become aware that the power dynamic associated with race and gender are not based on biological or genetic factors; rather, they are societal constructs that can serve as roadblocks to literacy acquisition and academic success. The first three epigraphs to this article, those written by Enrique, Charlie, and Joseph, demonstrate that they had experienced challenges that they had managed to overcome, and that writing about them in their literacy narratives had made them more consciously aware of what had transpired. As Maximillian Wetter points out, "the use of narrative does not refer to some fantastic, fictional story, but rather the way that humans construct truth through the process of storytelling" (Wetter, 2022, p. 152).

Translingual Experiences

Other published literacy narratives include accounts of literacy acquisition by non-native speakers who recount their struggles to learn English or adapt their writing to culturally based expectations for structure or style. A notable recent example is Suresh Canagarajah's *Transnational Literacy Autobiographies as Translingual Writing* (2020), which traces his own literacy journey and discusses how the literacy autobiography enabled him to become aware of "rhetorical challenges and options from [his] school days and graduate education to [his] early years as a faculty member" and that

it made him "more respectful of [his] vernacular resources, more rooted in [his] traditions, more resistant of rhetorical impositions, and more open to negotiating with dominant norms critically and creatively" (p. 17). This experience, he maintained, caused him to value the cultural traditions on which he was raised and to understand that he had choice and personal agency about how he presented his work. This awareness, he argues, can be useful for native, non-native English, and multilingual students, providing them with similar agency and self-confidence.

Comparable perspectives appear in Morris Young's *Minor Re/Visons: Asian American Literacy Narratives as a Rhetoric of Citizenship* (2004) and Noriega, Belcher and Black's *Autobiography Without Apology: The Personal Essay in Chicanx and Latinx Studies* (2020). Young's (2004) memoir consists of stories that, he emphasizes, are "not simply stories about learning to read and write; they are attempts to define who we are and who we want to become, both as individuals and as a community" (p. 26). *Autobiography Without Apology* links the personal with the public, explaining that telling personal yet public stories enables writers to utilize a range of writerly options.

Recently, Khadka, Davis-McElligatt, and Dorwick (2019) published *Narratives of Marginalized Identities in Higher Education Inside and Outside the Academy,* a collection of first-person accounts about what it was, and likely still is, like to be an outsider at the university. Arguing that the university claims to support diversity while actually sustaining racism, their book includes accounts by graduate students, tenure-track professors and administrators from locations around the world.

Benefits for Students

There are many benefits that writing a literacy narrative can provide for students, the most significant being that they foster self-awareness, lead to an increased sense of confidence, and generate cultural/political critique associated with established, often power-driven systems of literacy acquisition. Some of these narratives foreground success and transformation. Others may challenge culturally established ideas about literacy, raise questions about the politics of language acquisition (Eldred & Mortensen, 1992), and complicate the definition of literacy (Fleischer, 2000). In many instances, the reflection involved in writing in this genre enables students to realize that they have the potential to construct multiple, potentially new "selves" as they negotiate the complex demands of the academy. As Mary Soliday (1994) argued, "literacy narratives can expand students' sense of personal agency when they discover not only that their own stories are narratable,

but also that through their stories they can engage in a broader critical dialogue with each other and with well-known texts such as Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory*" ("Translating," p. 512). This self-awareness often results in students' reconnection with a former mental script, one which may be associated with negative school experiences that are unconsciously stifling motivation and influencing responses to education. Some of these scripts may have arisen from societal biases and inequalities, but students may not have examined the extent to which these scripts continue to influence their reaction to school. However, when students write literacy narratives, they can revisit and reevaluate scripts from the past, enabling them to write new scripts, looking backward and forward simultaneously. This reevaluation of past experiences and the writing of new scripts was particularly important in the narratives written by Enrique, Charlie, and Joseph, whose reflection on past challenges enabled them to construct new directions for the future.

Other transformations can occur as well. Frequently, when first-year writing students write literacy narratives, they often portray themselves as the heroes of their stories, having overcome obstacles to achieve success. In other instances, students gain insight into problems they now recognize as being due to their own past literacy practices. In "Heroes, Rebels, and Victims: Student Identities in Literacy Narratives," Bronwyn Williams (2003) pointed out that a student's identity often shifts from being the lone hero, having overcome adversity to succeed, to someone who sees the value of being more connected to others.

Each time I have assigned literacy narratives, many students have told me that they hadn't recalled the challenges they had faced and overcome until they began thinking about what they would write in their literacy narratives. Sometimes, they said, reflecting on the past was difficult, even painful. However, what often occurred is that the reflection that is necessary for writing in this genre enabled them to realize that they had indeed triumphed, or perhaps now have the potential to triumph, allowing them to claim "more powerful identities from which to speak, read, or write" (Norton, 2013, p. 3). Because literacy narratives often have an emotional impact on both writers and readers, they can contribute to students' understanding of how cultural, economic, and political forces have impacted their past experiences with literacy. As noted by Amanda Sladek (2021) in "Say What You Want to Say: Teaching Literacy Autoethnography to Resist Linguistic Prejudice," literacy narratives enable students from diverse ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds to become aware of asymmetrical power relations and racial inequities of which they may have been previously unaware, motivating them to question the value of what was emphasized in their

previous school experiences. In important ways, the insight that develops from writing in this genre gives students permission to problematize and question what they once believed was absolute about writing, learning, and their place in an educational or cultural scene.

Actually, all narratives, in some ways, can be viewed as acts of imagination, involving imagined identities and communities, many of them delving into the past and looking toward the future, and the literacy narrative privileges this type of backward/forward perspective. Reflecting back on one's former self in a past educational and/or cultural setting can thus be empowering, fostering the disposition to continue to move forward. Moreover, when students analyze their own stories and read or listen to those of others, they also become aware that linguistic and cultural transitions often come at an emotional cost; sometimes challenging beliefs and ideas that have shaped their lives. As one of my graduate students noted in her literacy narrative, her academic success resulted in her feeling removed from her family, a dynamic that is similar to Richard Rodriguez's (1982) recollections in *Hunger of Memory*. Because she no longer accepted the tenets of her religious and political upbringing, her mother told her that she wished she had never gone to the university. In many ways, this situation is similar to the experience of Eliza Doolittle in Shaw's *Pygmalian* (as cited in Eldred and Mortensen, 1992), who bemoans to Henry Higgins that she no longer knows who she is: "I have forgotten my own language," she tells him, but "can speak nothing but yours" (p. 515). There are, of course, personal costs to all transitions, especially when they occur when a student is young and is in the process of developing a sense of self. But there are also benefits. Writing a literacy narrative enabled the student discussed above to reflect on how her academic success had alienated her from her family, but it also led her to consider how she might address that alienation.

Stuent Examples

Many of the literacy narratives written by students in my classes demonstrate the various benefits of assigning this genre, and in this section, I will briefly discuss the four that I used as epigraphs to this essay.

Enrique

Enrique's literacy narrative, which I published in the second edition of my book *College Arguments: Understanding the Genres* (Clark, 2016), provides a lively example of the self-awareness and cultural insights that writing a literacy narrative can generate. Enrique began his essay by describing what a poor student and general miscreant he had been in high school:

> In High School, I failed 8 classes, took summer school every year, and barely graduated with a 2.1 GPA. And those are just my academic shortcomings. Don't forget the curfew tickets, truancy tickets, arrests, gang activity, and the two occasions I succeeded in evading police helicopters. The miscreant, the delinquent, statistic, society's worst nightmare—Me. (Solis, 2016, p. 298)

Writing a literacy narrative enabled Enrique to realize the extent to which he had found his high school "cumbersome and lifeless" and that his bad behavior was due, at least in part, to his inability to view the educational system as having value (Solis, 2016, p.299). He wrote that he had already learned that "getting an 'A' had less to do with actually learning than passively completing busywork" (Solis, 2016, p.299).

Eventually, Enrique managed to complete high school and enrolled in a community college, where the majority of students were minorities—Black and Hispanic. Yet, as he recalled in his narrative, he discovered that in his English class, everyone was white. "Even the professor noticed," he recounts, who observed that "There are no black students in here, are there?" (Solis, 2016, p. 299). Enrique raised his hand, answering "no," and then, referring to movie posters on the wall, added "and there is only one on the walls" (Solis, 2016, p. 299). In addition, because he had done little reading in high school, Enrique recalled that he began to view himself as an outsider in this class and wondered if he would be able to survive in a field in which he had previously failed.

In his narrative, Enrique wrote that his trial and ultimate development as a writer came when he was assigned to write a paper on *Huckleberry Finn*, choosing between two scholars with differing perspectives on whether or not *Huckleberry Finn* should be banned in certain schools. One scholar praised the book for its groundbreaking depiction of a black slave, Jim, as a character round with humanity. He emphasized *Huckleberry Finn's* relevance for young students today. The other scholar took an opposite approach. He stated that the depiction of Jim is still fraught with stereotypical elements that can be damaging to young black readers. In his narrative, Enrique wrote that he was aware that the instructor was strongly in favor of the first critic's position. In fact, the instructor stated that "anyone who wants to ban *Huck Finn* is clearly illiterate and incompetent" (Solis, 2016, p. 300).

Nevertheless, Enrique, who had always been inclined to rebel against authority, decided to counter that position, arguing that Huckleberry Finn was more relevant to white audiences who struggle with racism at the expense of discomfort or uneasiness felt by black readers. However, to his dismay, the teacher gave Enrique a zero on the essay and required him to

rewrite it, a process which, in his narrative, he characterized as "fueled by turbulent emotions and anger." (Solis, 2016, p. 301). On the day that his rewrite was returned, Enrique received an "A" and high praise from the instructor. Yet, although he felt "incredibly proud of himself, he was also deeply perturbed for being praised for embracing ideas that he didn't agree with. However, he concluded his narrative with the realization that in order "to enter this particular literary community," he first had to give up a huge part of his identity (Solis, 2016, p. 301). Nevertheless, he also added that as he grows and comes to "fruition as a writer," he feels encouraged to rediscover and utilize those passionate parts of himself (Solis, 2016, p. 301).

Writing his literacy narrative had helped Enrique realize that he had undergone a profound change in identity, which, in the context of what is currently understood about neuroplasticity, is likely to be manifested in new neuronal and synaptic movement in his brain. As a result, he had recalled and then reimagined a scene in which he had overcome a literacy-based challenge, gained insight into an egregious educational incident, and then reflected on the extent to which he was a "sellout or a success story" (Solis, 2016). Enrique is now a middle school teacher, and he comes to my class frequently to discuss how writing his literacy narrative had generated insights he had not remembered previously and contributed to the agency he developed for moving forward. "I worked on that narrative for days," he tells my students, and it helped him discover how he had become a writer.

Charlie

Enrique's narrative resulted in both personal growth and a growing awareness of the limits of educational authority. Charlie, a student from El Salvador, recounted a story in which he realized the extent it was possible to overcome a societal challenge, thanks to the determination of his mother. His narrative focused on a story that occurred when he was in the fourth grade and was required to type a paper—a problem for him because he had never owned a computer and didn't know how to type. In his narrative, Charlie recalled that he and his mother went to the library to use a computer available to the public, where it took them thirty minutes to figure out how to turn it on—nor did they realize that they had to save the text he had painstakingly written. Charlie lost the limited amount of text he had produced, and when his mother asked questions of a librarian who spoke Spanish, she was treated rudely. Nevertheless, undaunted, his mother, "with tears rolling down her cheeks," drove straight to the home of an aunt who owned an old typewriter, which Charlie used to type his story, working all night, while "my mom encouraged me by bringing me fruit and sitting on the

side, reading a book to keep me company." That experience helped Charlie realize how different his "family was from the average American family," but "two months later," he wrote, "my mom signed my sister and me up for a free after-school computer course and got us each a library card, ensuring that her children never had to go through that again." Like Enrique, Charlie felt a tremendous sense of pride and confidence that he could continue to move ahead. Charlie shared his narrative with other students in the class; many had had similar experiences, but, like Charlie, had managed to overcome them.

Joseph

Joseph's narrative traces his realization that although both his mother and father consider themselves Louisiana Creole, which he defines as "both a cultural and ancestral designation denoting a mixed racial and ethnic background," he discovered when he entered high school that in White America, one is considered either black or white and that cultural designations, such as being Creole, are viewed as unimportant. Reflecting on his high school educational experiences, Joseph realized that "Black Americans have been separated from their heritage. Our history in this nation literally begins with slavery in the history books, a history architected and told, by and large, by White historians," and that Black identity has been "imposed by the societal White hierarchy to denote that we exist outside of Whiteness, Americans of a 2nd tier." Ultimately, by reflecting on his background in his literacy narrative, Joseph understood that "Black identities are subtly informed and solidified through schooling and education," but he also understood that he didn't have to accept that he had only one "identity." He could be both Black and Creole.

Raphael

The fourth narrative, written by Raphael, came in a letter to me a semester after he had completed my class and exemplifies how the recollections involved in writing a literacy narrative can facilitate meaningful self-discovery. Apparently, Raphael had chosen to major in business, but he hadn't thought deeply about his choice or what he planned to do after he graduated. The process of writing a literacy narrative enabled him to recall that he had always enjoyed math and was, in fact, quite pleased about his choice of career because it would allow him to focus on finance. He discovered a sense of himself as someone who was genuinely interested in finance, aspiring to the "identity" of a financial planner. Writing his literacy narrative

enabled Raphael to experience a clarity of purpose and a sense of satisfaction that he hadn't felt before.

Conclusion

Of course, not all literacy narratives are as thoughtfully written as the examples cited in the four epigraphs to this article, nor do they all generate the same degree of critical insight into entrenched power inequities or educational and societal limits. However, what I want to emphasize in this article is the importance for writing program administrators and teachers to consider the literacy narrative as an essential assignment. It is a genre that enables students to explore and reflect on their past experiences with language, schooling, education, and/or learning, thereby aligning with the *CWPA Statement on Racial Injustice and Systemic Racism* (CWPA Executive Board and Officers, 2020). Writing a literacy narrative allows students to recall who they were, who they are, and who they might be, and they all generate new insight into various cultural and educational settings. Most importantly, they can help students realize that their destiny, at least to some extent, is in their own hands.

Note

1. IRB Protocol Number FY23-184.

References

Alexander, Kara P. (2015). From story to analysis: Reflection and uptake in the literacy narrative assignment. *Composition Studies*, *43*(2), 43–71.

Bell, Derrick. (1987). *And we are not saved: The elusive quest for racial justice*. Basic Books.

— (1989). *Faces at the bottom of the well: The permanence of racism*. Basic Books

Canagarajah, Suresh. (2020). *Transnational literacy autobiographies as translingual writing*. Routledge.

Carpenter, William, & Falbo, Bianca. (2006). Literacy, identity, and the "successful" student writer. In Bronwyn T. Williams (Ed.). *Identity papers: Literacy and power in higher education* (pp. 92–108). Utah State University Press.

Clandinin, D. Jean, & Rosiek, Jerry. (2007). Mapping a landscape of narrative inquiry: Borderland spaces and tensions. In D. Jean Clandinin (Ed.), *Handbook of narrative inquiry: Mapping a methodology* (pp. 35–75). Sage Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452226552

Clark, Irene L. (2015). *College arguments: Understanding the genres* (2nd ed.). Kendall Hunt.

— (2016). Genre, identity, and the brain: Insights from neuropsychology. *The Journal of General Education*, *65*(1), 1-19. https://doi.org/10.5325/jgeneeduc.65.1.0001

Connors, Robert J. (1987). Personal writing assignments. *College Composition and Communication*. *38*(2), 166–183. https://doi.org/10.2307/357717

Cozolino, Louis. (2013). *The social neuroscience of education: Optimizing attachment and learning in the classroom*. W. W. Norton.

Crawford, Ryan. (2024). *Emotional value in the composition classroom: Self, agency, and neuroplasticity*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003401810

CWPA Executive Board and Officers. (2020). CWPA statement on racial injustice and systemic racism. *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, *44*(1), 15-16.

Delgado, Richard. (1989). Storytelling for oppositionists and others: A plea for narrative. *Michigan Law Review*. *87*(8), 2411–2441.

Delgado, Richard, Stefancic, Jean, Chilton, Karen, & Harris, Angela. (2017). *Critical race theory: An introduction* (3rd ed.). New York University Press

Eldred, Janet Carey., & Mortensen, Peter. (1992). Reading literacy narratives. *College English*, *54*(5), 512–539. https://doi.org/10.2307/378153

Elbow, Peter. (1995). Being a writer vs. being an academic: A conflict in goals. *College Composition and Communication*, *46*(1), 72–83. https://doi.org/10.2307/358871

Falk, Emily. (2021, June 27). Op-ed: Why storytelling is an important tool for social change. *Los Angeles Times*. A24. https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2021-06-27/stories-brain-science-memory-social-change

Fleischer, Charles. (2000). Literacy narratives. In Elizabeth Close & Katherine D. Ramsey (Eds.), *A middle mosaic: A celebration of reading, writing, and reflective practice at the middle level* (pp. 67–72). National Council of Teachers of English.

Graff, Gerald. (2003). *Clueless in academe: How schooling obscures the life of the mind*. Yale University Press.

Grall, Clare, Tamborini, Ron, Weber, René, & Schmälzle, Ralf. (2021). Stories collectively engage listeners' brains: Enhanced intersubject correlations during reception of personal narratives. *Journal of Communication*. *71*(2). 332–355. https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqab004

Greenfield, Susan. (2016). *You and me: The neuroscience of identity*. Notting Hill Editions.

Iacoboni, Marco. (2016, Oct. 19). Neuroscientist Marco Iacoboni on how mirror neurons teach us to be human. *UCLA Health Newsroom*. https://www.uclahealth.org/news/neuroscientist-marco-iacoboni-on-how-mirror-neurons-teach-us-to-be-human

Khadka, Santosh, Davis-McElligatt, Joanna, & Dorwick, Keith. (2019). (Eds). *Narratives of marginalized identities in higher education: Inside and outside the academy*. Taylor & Francis.

Mar, Raymond A. (2011). The neural basis of social cognition and story comprehension. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *62*, 103–134. https://doi.org 10.1146/annurev-psych-120709-145406

Martinez, Aja Y. (2020). *Counterstory: The rhetoric and writing of critical race theory*. The Conference on College Composition and Communication of the National Council of Teachers of English.

Minnix, Christopher. (2015). Basic writers in composition's public turn: Voice and influence in the basic writing classroom. *Journal of Basic Writing. 34*(1). 21–43.

Noriega, Chon A., Belcher, Wendy, & Villasenor Black, Charlene. (Eds.). (2020). *Autobiography without apology: The personal essay in Chicanx and Latinx studies*. UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press.

Norton, Bonny. (2013). *Identity and language learning: Extending the conversation*. 2nd Edition. Multilingual Matters.

Rodriguez, Richard. (1982). *Hunger of memory: The education of Richard Rodriguez*. Dal Press.

Royster, Jaqueline J. (1996). When the first voice you hear is not your own. College Composition and Communication, 50(4), 645-661.

Rose, Mike. (1983). Remedial writing courses: A critique and a proposal. *College English*, *45*(2), 109–128. https://doi.org/10.2307/377219

— (1989). *Lives on the boundary: A moving account of the struggles and achievements of America's educationally underprepared*. Penguin Group.

Satel, Sally, & Lilienfeld, Scott O. (2013). *Brainwashed: The seductive appeal of mindless neuroscience*. Basic Books.

Seung, Sebastian. (2012). *Connectome: How the brain's wiring makes us who we are*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Sladek, Amanda. (2021). "Say what you want to say!": Teaching literacy autoethnography to resist linguistic prejudice. In Rebecca Jackson & Jackie Grutsch McKinney (Eds.), *Self+culture+writing: Autoethnography for/as writing studies* (pp. 126–135). Utah State University Press.

Smith, Sidonie, & Watson, Julia. (2010). *Reading autobiography: A guide for interpreting life narratives* (2nd ed.). University of Minnesota Press.

Soliday, Mary. (1994). Translating self and difference through literacy narratives. *College English, 56*(5), 511–526. https://doi.org/10.2307/378604

— (2002). *Politics of remediation: Institutional and student needs in higher education*. University of Pittsburgh Press.

Solis, Enrique. (2016). Delving into a new world: A sellout or a success story?. In Irene L. Clark (Ed.), *College arguments: Understanding the genres* (2nd ed.) (pp. 298–301). Kendall Hunt.

Vieira, Kate, Heap, Luaren, Descourtis, Sandra, Isaac, Johnathan, Senanayake, Samitha, Swift, Brenna, Castillo, Chris, Kim, Ann Meejung, Krzus-Shaw, Kassia, Black, Maggie, Ọládipọ̀, Ọlá, Yang, Xiaopei, Ratanapraphart, Patricia, Tiwari, Nikhil M., Velarde, Lisa, and West, Gordon Blaine. (2019). Literacy is a socio-historic phenomenon with the potential to liberate and oppress. In Linda Adler-Kassner & Elizabeth Wardle. (Eds.), *(Re)considering what we know: Learning thresholds in writing, composition, rhetoric, and literacy* (pp. 36–55). Utah State University Press.

Villanueva, Victor, & Moeggenber, Zarah C. (2018). A tale of two generations: How we were taught and what we learned (or not). *Journal of Basic Writing*, *37* (1), 35-55.

Wetter, Maximillian. (2022). Narrative, law and race. *Dialogue: Journal of Phi Sigma Tau*, *64*(2–3). 152–158.

Williams, Patricia J. (1988). On being the object of property. *Signs*, *14*(1), 5–24. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3174659

Williams, Bronwyn T. (2003). Heroes, rebels, and victims: Student identities in literacy narratives. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, *47*(4), 342–345. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40014780

Young, Morris. (2004). *Minor re/Visions: Asian American literacy narratives as a rhetoric of citizenship*. Southern Illinois University Press.

Irene Clark is Professor of English and Director of Composition at California State University, Northridge. She has published in *The Journal of Basic Writing*, *College Composition and Communication*, *WPA Writing Program Administration*, *Composition Forum*, WAC Journal, *Writing Center Journal*, and *Journal of General Education*. Her books include *Writing the Successful Thesis and Dissertation: Entering the Conversation* (Prentice Hall, 2007), *Writing in the Center,* 4th Edition (Kendall Hunt, 2009), *College Arguments: Understanding the Genres,* 2nd edition (Kendall Hunt, 2016), *Concepts in Composition: Theory and Practice,* 3rd edition (Routledge, 2019) and *Writing, Imitation and Performance: Insights from Neuroscience Research* (Routledge, 2023).