

# WRITING AND READING HISTORY: TEACHING NARRATIVE IN A LINKED WRITING COURSE

Brian Turner and Judith Kearns

It has become almost a truism among Writing-in-the-Disciplines (WID) teachers that we must, as Charles Bazerman has argued, first understand “the dynamics of the texts with which our students work” if we are to introduce them effectively to academic discourses (qtd. in Kirscht, Levine, and Reiff 1989, 371). Our understanding of these dynamics is now at a fairly advanced stage. Thanks to a wealth of WID research and work in the rhetoric of inquiry, we know a good deal, for instance, about the field-specific operation of metaphor, terminology, introductions, and lines of argument in disciplinary rhetorics (see, for example, Swales and Najjar 1987; Gross 1990; Fahnestock and Secor 1991; McCloskey 1992). Valuable as this analytic knowledge has been, however, its potential for transforming our pedagogical practice has hardly been tapped. The scholarly literature occasionally reports classroom applications that seem rooted in rhetorical analyses of specialized discourses, but with rare exceptions have such applications been designed by teachers of upper-level courses or by “insider” teachers of discipline-specific courses (usually with the help of a compositionist).<sup>1</sup>

Though suggestive, these applications do not address the peculiar problems of first-year composition courses, especially the pedagogical and political complications stemming from the insider-outsider dilemma. From a pedagogical perspective, curricula and assignments for upper-level apprentices in biology or sociology, however imaginatively designed, do not serve the needs of students in a first-year composition class with diverse interests who are clearly “outsiders” – not yet comfortable in the academy, let

alone a particular discipline. These students would benefit most from assignments which strike “a curricular balance between the interests of the learner and the demands of the discipline” (Russell, 301). From a political perspective, cross-disciplinary ventures in which compositionists *help* insiders develop assignments for upper-level courses bear little resemblance to the solitary initiatives undertaken by teachers who develop WID-based assignments in their first-year composition classes. Whereas the former often lead to cooperative and collegial partnerships, the latter might well provoke territorial hostility – the perception that the compositionist is trespassing. Any first-year composition assignment that hopes to draw on rhetoric-of-inquiry research to improve students’ facility with disciplinary rhetorics must be developed with a shrewd sense of how our colleagues might perceive us.

The purpose of this paper is to describe an assignment which bridges the gap between research on disciplinary discourse and the curricular goals of a first-year composition course – in this case, a course linked with a section of first-year history. As well as reflecting research on historiography, the design of the assignment took into account a number of institutional constraints, foremost among them the dangers of our being perceived as “poachers,” making a foray into a discipline whose tacit rules we cannot fully understand and whose representative members at our institution might resist invasion. At the University of Winnipeg these dangers became particularly acute in 1993, the year we began using the assignment. The writing program had begun preparing for large-scale changes, about which faculty across campus were intensely curious. The curriculum we developed for the composition half of the linked course might well shape, via the university’s rumour mill, the ways in which the institution as a whole perceived the program. Teaching disciplinary discourse incautiously might jeopardize opportunities for subsequent links, both with history and with other departments, which we believed would be invaluable for students. On the other hand, if we relied entirely on writing-to-learn assignments – the sorts of assignments which the program had used in the past and with which our colleagues in other disciplines were familiar – we might reinforce the attitude of those who saw the writing program as a service department, a place for offloading time-consuming marking of compositions.

Our solution to this dilemma was to strike a pedagogical balance between WID and writing-to-learn approaches, more specifically, between an approach which drew on research in historiography and one which drew on our experience “as compositionists” with personal writing assignments. The solution demonstrates that the teaching of personal writing in the academy need not be opposed to the teaching of “the public genres of the disciplines” (Russell 294). As we will explain further in the conclusion, an unnecessary dichotomy between these two has often been assumed.

First, though, we identify the factors that influenced our development of the assignment, and summarize the historiographical framework of J.H. Hexter on which the assignment is based.<sup>2</sup> The second section of this article describes the assignment. In the third and fourth sections, we use examples of students’ work to illustrate how the assignment not only enhances students’ understanding of history as constructed knowledge, but also facilitates their self-knowledge.

## **Institutional and Theoretical Contexts**

The assignment we will be describing in the next section—a personal narrative—is in some ways quite traditional. What distinguishes it from the kind of essay that has long been used in composition courses are the details of its design and the context in which it was employed. Since the course was to be linked with a section of first-year history, and would include only students who were enrolled in that section, we were clearly being given an institutional mandate to teach “history writing” or “writing on history” in some way. However, since the course was also going to be, in most cases, the only writing course our students would take at the university, we did not want to focus too narrowly on history writing. We balanced the two demands by requiring students to summarize and critique chapters from the texts used in their history course, as well as write a conventional research paper (on a topic related to their history lectures and texts but not covered in depth). These conventional assignments would give students practice in rhetorical skills essential to most academic writing and at the same time enhance their understanding of the course content in history. In addition to preparing students more broadly for upper-level courses in a variety of disciplines,

this emphasis on conventional assignments indicated to the history department not only that students taking our course would reinforce their learning of content, but also that their instructors would not run wild, pretending (like their sophistic precursors?) to a knowledge they did not have. And it still left us room for one major assignment.

This assignment was foremost in our minds as we began reviewing the literature in historiography and consulting with faculty in the history department. We anticipated using it early in the course (when students had not yet done enough reading to write critiques or research papers), but otherwise we were guided by only one conviction (tempered with caution about our outsider status): that students “ought to be required to write . . . even in an abbreviated way – using the forms, genres, and ways of speaking of their discourse community” (Jolliffe and Brier, 72). Our reading and consultations soon indicated that one “way of speaking” was particularly common among historians: narration. This was, of course, hardly a revelation. Nor was the fact that narration is a discursive mode about which members of the history department – like the discipline as a whole – disagreed vigorously.<sup>3</sup> For some historians, the kind of story-telling that characterizes narrative discourse is the best means of representing events as they actually occurred; for others, the narrative story merely “tells fictions about the present” (Stein, 7). Given our caution about trespassing, one might think that such disagreement would be reason enough for compositionist outsiders to stay away, expecting historical narratives to resemble minefields. But the debate was not over whether narrative was actually used in history writing; it was, rather, about whether narratives ought to be used. What if we constructed the assignment, we wondered, with the main goal of making students more discerning readers of history and with thought of their learning to write history more competently only as a secondary goal? It seemed to us that this approach might please both sides of the debate: for historians who valued narratives, our students would become better rhetors; for historians who distrusted narratives, our students would at the very least become what Cronkhite has called better “rhetorees” – that is, readers who are more rhetorically aware (262).

What made this line of thinking promising is that, as composition teachers, we both had considerable experience with narratives. Though the assignments we had used in the

past were more “expressivist” than would be suitable for a history class, we were comfortable discussing many of the discursive features that might be considered essential to any story, such as pacing, the use of descriptive details, turning point, climax, and so on. Moreover, we knew that research in composition indicated that narratives are easier for many novice writers to handle (Freedman; Crowhurst). This was an important advantage, since we expected the class to include superior writers, “at-risk” students, and even students in their second and third year of study. In such a heterogeneous class, opening with a difficult analytical assignment would only widen the gap between the strong and the weak, discouraging the latter from the outset.

It was in this context—having decided that we would make a foray into disciplinary discourse with a single assignment, and that the assignment would likely be a narrative—that we discovered J.H. Hexter’s essay “The Rhetoric of History.” Hexter’s essay provided us with the framework and terms needed to help students write “historically” and, in doing so, led us to the central purpose of the assignment: to help students realize that history is not reported but constructed. “The Rhetoric of History” is a brilliantly evocative account—and, as its enthusiastic tone makes clear, defense of narrative as “the rhetorical mode most commonly resorted to by historians” (374). With the use of striking examples from baseball, the author explains not only why narrative is appropriate in history writing but how narrative works.

The purpose of good history writing, says Hexter, is to inform, but the nature of the information conveyed requires a very different approach from that of the sciences. Whereas natural scientists always seek the precise and the unambiguous, historians will, “without compunction . . . sacrifice exactness for evocative force” (369). This is not because they care less for precision but because engagement with history requires imagination as well as understanding; it requires “that confrontation with events long past and men long dead which is an indispensable condition of knowing them” (373). For such purposes, scientific denotative language simply will not do: “for communicating what the historian knows, a rhetoric more like that employed in the fictive arts . . . is not only permissible but on occasion indispensable” (370). Among these fictive arts are metaphorical language and “ordinary discourse” (373). The

most indispensable tool, though, is narrative discourse: "The principle of coherence traditionally and still most generally employed by historians is narrative. Usually . . . they communicate what they know by telling a story or stories" (373).

From our point of view, the argument that history writing depends a great deal upon rhetoric, the "fictive arts," and especially narrative was reassuring. Since these were areas in which we had some expertise, Hexter was confirming our sense that, as compositionists, we could guide students into the discourse of history. Even more important, though, was the fact that he offered us a lexicon that we recognized as pedagogically useful. For Hexter, historical narrative is most commonly used to answer the question "How did it come about that X occurred?" where X is the event or events that the historian has chosen to explain. This framing of a specific question—which might also be thought of as the statement of a problem—is the crucial first step in writing history; it establishes what Hexter calls the **terminal point** of a narrative, the point in consideration of which every detail is selected and arranged. Without a clear terminal point, a recognizable event whose occurrence is to be explained, the historian would simply not know where to begin, how to pace her story, or what facts to relate. With it, she can determine her **starting point** (a point to be determined not by logic, but by one's sense of dramatic appropriateness) and her **turning point** (the point where events changed direction, or *could* have changed direction). She will also have a sense of the **historical tempo** appropriate to her particular story, and will thus know where **expansions or contractions of scale** are needed (places where the importance of events leading to the terminal point requires the narrative to be slowed down or sped up, or even demands a shift to another **predominant mode**, such as description or analysis). It goes without saying that all of the historian's decisions about the pacing and essential points in the narrative must be based on historical evidence, but strict fidelity to the available record, in the scientific sense, is not enough. All the historian's decisions must be rooted in the principle of **maximum impact**, which will "bring those who seek to understand the past into confrontation with and vicarious participation in some part of it" (380).

## The Assignment

Armed with Hexter's analysis, we set about finding a topic or topics for a narrative essay—that is, an appropriate historical problem framed as the question “How did X come about?” For our sake, at least some commonality among topics seemed advised since we planned to assess every rough draft; twenty-five essays related only by some thematic connection to the history course would severely restrict our ability to offer substantive advice for revision. But conventional essay topics in history seemed inappropriate in any case. If we simply asked our diverse class to solve an historical problem—for example, “How did Native Americans come to be placed on reservations?” or “How did Trotsky come to be a key figure in the Soviet Bolshevik Party?”—the primary and secondary research required might well leave our at-risk students behind early in the course. The same obstacle stood in the way of another approach: having the class as a whole attend “an historical event” such as a local rally or a political campaign speech. This hands-on approach might establish more common evidential ground and lead to interesting discussion of how we perceive events differently (and thus construct varied histories), but it, too, would ultimately entail contextualizing research; moreover, since we would be choosing the event, some students would almost certainly lack interest in it.

Yet there was one topic in which all the students would be interested and about which all were fairly knowledgeable: themselves. With an appropriate and common “terminal point” to focus their narratives and discourage desultory life stories or straightforward chronicles, we might use the resources of autobiography to introduce fundamental ideas about constructing history. We decided, therefore, to ask them this question: How did you come to be at the University of Winnipeg?

Asking for autobiographies was not without risks. Indeed, the author of the very text we were using in the course says that teaching autobiographical writing demeans our profession because it invites confession rather than scholarly analysis (Marius 1992, 476).<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, we believed that the disciplinary connection of our course with the history course might hold the potential disadvantages of personal writing in check: that is, if the assignment description emphasized that our students were to think of themselves as historical figures,

any naive notions of sincerity that might otherwise be evoked by the invitation to write of oneself would be discouraged. Requiring students to work with Hexter's entire framework, not just the terminal point, would in itself discourage simple autobiography. Prompted by the framework to look for and to articulate pattern in the events of their particular lives, students would begin to develop historical perspective; each would see, for example, that her life had a turning point, or *potential* turning points, just as other students' lives did, and that an account of her life called for an appropriate narrative "tempo," even though she might march to the beat of a different drum. Another step toward deflecting autobiographical confession would be to have students write of themselves in the third person. Finally, we asked students to look beyond personal factors which had shaped their decision to attend the University of Winnipeg. As we said in the assignment:

I don't want your essay to be narrowly autobiographical: although you are talking about your own life and choices, I also want you to demonstrate an awareness that personal choice is not the only factor shaping one's life, that individuals are shaped by larger forces. For this reason, I ask you to provide three types of documentation: documents from your personal life, documents from the lives of your friends and relatives, and documents referring to larger historical forces.

We encouraged students to be creative in their use of this evidence, not to think only of paper documents. As things turned out, they responded so enthusiastically that we needed to take boxes to class on the due date to carry away the weight of the evidence. We were deluged with videos, sweatshirts and uniforms, sports trophies and medals, old report cards, photographs, transcripts, yearbooks, and a range of exotic miscellaneous items, among them a necklace, a toy sheriff's badge, a miniature police car, a plastic Eiffel Tower, a lego train, airline tickets, and the hospital identification bracelet of a student's daughter. These were only the most visible signs of the students' deep engagement with the assignment.



## Writing History

To demonstrate how students applied Hexter in drafting and revising their narratives, it seems appropriate to consider one example at some length. What follows is the brief early draft of an essay by Michael, a student in the second section of the linked course. The “predominant mode” of this draft, like that of many others at this early stage, was analytical; it needed to be transformed into narrative through extensive revision:

How I decided to attend the University of Winnipeg was, essentially, a clear-cut decision. During my early years in high-school, I went on several field trips to this province’s secondary education institutions. Although they all had their strengths and weaknesses, I had decided, during the process, quite early that I would be attending the University of Winnipeg.

The reasons for that decision were numerous and varied. The university was small, with a relatively small student body, taking classes to a more personal level. Also, the location of the university made it easy to get to from just about anywhere in the city, an important point for myself because I am from out of town and do not know the city all that well. All of these factors were important in considering where I would attend my secondary education, but perhaps the most important deciding factor was the week I spent here attending Mini-University.

During the tenth grade, I was given the opportunity to try out university for a week-long period. I accepted because a basic look at criminology was offered, and I jumped at the chance, (I had always wanted, and still do, to have a career with the law).

The instructor for the course was Professor Skoog. I found him to be not at all a stuffy academic, but rather an ordinary guy like many I knew. This relieved me of any sense of intimidation that I had felt in attending university. When I later found out that the very same Professor Skoog was coordinating a bachelor of arts in the field of justice and law, I applied to the university and was accepted.

Flat and all too brief, this draft simply categorizes a series of factors responsible for Michael's arrival at university. It demonstrates several other weaknesses as well: it lacks a clear "starting point"; it identifies but does not adequately develop a "turning point"; it never establishes a "tempo"; and it neglects the role of larger cultural and social influences on Michael's life.

The extent of his revisions is immediately apparent in the introductory paragraph of the final text, where Michael establishes an historical context which prepares for the entire narrative. As composition teachers, we would have encouraged context of this sort in any writing class. In this linked class, however, we were able to draw on Hexter to show students the importance of selecting contextual details with an eye on the essay's terminal point. Students needed to realize that the facts of their lives, like the facts of any historical event, are infinite in number, and that the terminal point we had chosen for them, combined with the stages of their lives that they would choose to focus on, would to some extent determine the selection of details right from the beginning of their narratives. More important, we hoped that by emphasizing this process of selection, we would initiate a metacognitive awareness of selection itself, an awareness that written history always involves authorial choice from among the actual facts of history. For many first-year students, this very fundamental notion that history is constructed by an author (though constrained by the available evidence) is something of an epiphany. Michael's revised introduction may not in itself reveal such broader awareness of the historian's task, but it does show the author taking a more active, discriminating role in selecting contextual details:

The town of Twin Oaks, Manitoba, is located approximately ninety kilometres north of the province's capital, Winnipeg. It is a small working class town of about five thousand people, all of whom, either directly or indirectly, depend on the local paper mill for their livelihood. Since the mill began operation in 1926, it has provided food for the dinner table for the successive generations of several families. Michael [L] was born into one such family, and the mill will continue to have a predominant role in his life, as it had for the people before him. Michael [L] was born the first of four children in 1973.

Not all students wrote their narratives with this kind of “starting point”; in fact, the assignment tells students not to “make the mistake of thinking that you must begin your narrative at *your* beginning.” As Hexter makes clear, one’s choice of a terminal point in a good historical narrative limits the number of appropriate starting points. Since Michael will subsequently claim that his home town, and especially the town’s dependence on the mill, played a crucial role in his life and in his decision to go to the university, it is appropriate to begin the narrative in 1926 with the town’s early history. And having begun in this way, the author needs almost immediately to situate himself in the succession of generations.

In what follows, Michael doesn’t make the mistake of paying equal attention to each stage of his life, but moves from one important stage to another rapidly, establishing the “historical tempo” appropriate to his narrative. The story of his life is one of early academic success, fostered by his parents’ encouragement, followed by a period of teenage rebellion and boredom with school. For the first half of the narrative, his task is to discover details which will plausibly and concisely convey to his readers just how central education was to the life of his family. He accomplishes this through a “contraction of scale”; he compresses the account of his childhood years into a single paragraph with half-a-dozen telling facts, culminating in a final, striking image of his parents’ aggressive commitment to their son’s education:

His father, a skilled labourer at the paper mill, and his mother, a teacher’s assistant, worked very hard to provide a comfortable standard of living for their family. Although neither of Michael L’s parents had continued their education past the level of high school (his father having dropped out before that), they both understood that if their children wanted to live comfortably as adults, they would have to continue their education further than they had. As a result, doing well at school was encouraged in the L household. Both of [Michael] L’s parents played an active role in their children’s education, whether it was helping with homework, or attending parent/teacher meetings. [Michael] could recall as a child, being allowed to watch only half an hour of television a night, and then spending the rest of the evening doing such things as

learning the multiplication tables, which were presented to him on cue cards by his parents.

This shrewd use of representative details helps Michael's paragraph achieve "maximum impact."

By means of such description the historian is able, in Hexter's words, "to render his account forceful, vivid, and lively" (380) so that readers can experience the past vicariously. Marius makes a similar point when he tells us that descriptive details let us imagine the past, let us "place ourselves within it . . . and find it familiar and partly understandable" (61). At the same time, unlike Hexter's "The Rhetoric of History," Marius's text is written for students and therefore offers cautionary advice. He emphasizes two dangers in using description. One is the temptation to include too much: "Descriptions are best when they tell just enough to help readers understand something significant and then move on" (66). The other is the temptation to "make up facts," to "get carried away by a novelistic impulse that may smack of dishonesty" (65). Though both pieces of advice are familiar to composition teachers, in the context of this assignment we found them particularly useful for teaching students about the relationships among composition, ethos, and audience. Because their lifelong experience with "story" — in print, on film, and by word-of-mouth — has made them relatively sophisticated about notions of pacing and sensitive to the false note, they can more easily appreciate (and anticipate) the dangers of boring their audience or making it distrustful when writing a narrative than they can when writing an argumentative essay. And because their familiarity with their own lives gives them a large reservoir of representative, plausible facts, they can in writing narratives more easily avoid the problems of overkill and falsity than they would be able to in writing a research paper. Furthermore, the assignment's demand for documentation primed them to recount their lives in a scholarly and "factive" manner rather than a sensational, fictive manner; whereas the narrative assignments we have used in the past left students with the option of "creating" facts that would enliven or make more coherent their stories, this exercise in history writing kept their feet firmly on the ground. Plausibility was at least as important as creativity — just as in most of the academic writing they will do for other courses.

The two paragraphs that follow recount the frustration of Michael's parents, as their early expectation "that he was bound to attend university" is disappointed. Describing the influence of less studious friends and the temptation to be satisfied with working at the paper mill, Michael broadens the scope of his narrative without slowing its tempo. The degree of reflection and analysis involved in this section strengthens the author's ethos, making Michael seem more like the disinterested historian than the self-centered student who pours out his heart in the confessional mode that Marius believes personal writing invites. Here and there, at significant points in this passage, we also find effective "expansions of scale" – particularly, for example, when he speaks of his first job in the local mill and his parents' concern "that he had fallen into the 'small town trap,' settling for what was easily accessible, instead of exploring his full potential."

All of this has prepared his readers very well for his treatment of the "turning point" near the end of his essay:

Thankfully, [Michael] had second thoughts about giving up on secondary education, after he had the opportunity to attend a week long mini-university course. . . . This course was taught by Professor Doug Skoog, and [Michael] found "Skoog" to be a complete surprise. He was not at all the stuffy academic that he had expected, but rather a jovial kind of guy, with lots of interesting things to say. [Michael] found himself to be, for the first time in a long while, listening to what was being said inside of a classroom. . . . It was here that [Michael] realized that education still had something to give him, and that there was more to life than the paper mill at Twin Oaks, Manitoba. So when [Michael] returned to high school, he pursued his education with a new vigour, and when graduation day had come and gone, [Michael] did not enter the paper mill, as many of his friends and relatives did, both past and present, but instead enrolled at the University of Winnipeg.

Though his instincts about not belaboring the story after the turning point are sound, Michael's closing sentences are, unfortunately, rushed and unsatisfying. Nevertheless, what we see in this final paragraph is a lively use of language, effective expansion of scale, and a strong sense of the need for unity in

the narrative as a whole. Actively using rather than slavishly following the example of Hexter, he has managed to convey the impression that his arriving at the University of Winnipeg was the consequence of the particular facts that he has selected and arranged.

The construction of such a coherent text demands skills of a kind that our students will use in all of their writing, academic and otherwise, not simply in the paired history course. From its earliest stages, the assignment poses problems of invention that students will face elsewhere: the young man who hasn't much to say about his trip as a teenager to the Great Wall of China will find it just as difficult to develop other, more conventionally "academic" topics. The need to distinguish between those details which contribute to the explanatory power of the story and those which do not develops the kind of judgment for which our students' future readers will be grateful. Another considerable advantage of this assignment is that most students are eager to revise, the incentive to "get it right" being that much greater when the subject is the student's own life and the request for additional information more flattering than if the topic were, say, the causes of the American Civil War.

## Writing the Self

A second benefit of the writing assignment, one which we did not fully anticipate but which became almost as important as the first, was that it realized many of the advantages associated with personal writing. Students were motivated to write, familiarity with their subject matter allowed them to assume an authoritative stance, and they often gained in the process of reflection and analysis a degree of self-knowledge. The assignment seemed situated, in short, securely within that middle ground identified by Robert Connors as appropriate space for composition:

Learning that one has a right to speak, that one's voice and personality have validity, is an important step . . . [in entering the world of written discourse]. . . . But as teachers, we always have to encourage, even demand attempts of the next step—to go beyond merely personal, either outside into encompassing the world in discourse, or inside into shaping our personal

observations into the touching, deeply empathetic and finally metapersonal stuff of which the greatest writing is made. (181)

Requiring that students broaden their scope to consider historical forces playing on their characters and decisions, one of the most difficult tasks posed by the assignment, prompted many of them to reconsider what they had made of their lives to this point, the extent to which their choices had been free or predetermined, and the relation between their opportunities, those of their contemporaries, and those of other generations. Several, for instance, struggled to articulate the complicated connections among admiring their parents' success stories (in many cases the consequence of hard work rather than education), resisting parental pressure to do well in school, and realizing the exigencies of their own circumstances—that they are becoming adults, as one student put it, in “the age of the information highway,” when “Starting at the bottom and working your way to the top was becoming a myth.” The revisions in many drafts revealed not the self-indulgent confession that critics of “personal” writing fear, but instead a gain in awareness through a more balanced and detached perspective.

For many, writing of themselves in the third person proved a catalyst for more thorough reflection. A number of students commented that this requirement gave them difficulty in their early drafts, but that they saw the problem as merely mechanical: “It was difficult at points to exclude ‘I’ and replace it with my name”; “In general, I found it very hard to have to write about myself, especially when I had to use my name so many times and I am not used to that.” Yet the final texts, which seldom slip into first-person narration, demonstrate a surprising capacity not only to master this strategy but to adapt and extend it. One writer, for instance, created a persona which blended the voices of his parents, recounting the tale of their son’s high school years. Paying careful attention to plausibility—“From what we could make out, from the little information Peter would supply us with . . .”—this writer sacrificed omniscience, and with it some of the insights his readers might otherwise share, in order to gain the impact of a more cohesive, mature perspective. For this student, like several other relatively weak writers, the adoption of an alternative voice was liberating.

Far from being merely a mechanical exercise, then, the requirement that they write of themselves in the third person prompted students to explore a range of devices which would allow distance from their own experiences. Some realized gradually that retrospective narration held the potential for irony. In an early draft, though she has not yet become comfortable with the third person, Michelle uses quotation marks as a skeptical frame on her earlier habits of speech: "I would work and live on my own and try to 'find myself'"; by the time she submits her final text, Michelle has incorporated this perspective fully into her narrative, introducing herself with a light touch as "the young Miss [K]" and bringing the more distant past easily into the narration to construct its meaning—"Michelle knew she could no longer rely on marrying a millionaire or winning a lottery like she had once aspired to do."

Another effective technique was self-quotation: "I thought I was going to die," Carol recalls of her first panic attack. "I had no idea what was happening to me." It may be no accident that the narrative from which this passage is taken deals with traumatic experiences, circumstances over which the writer had, at the time, no control. By giving her a degree of retrospective control over the impact of these experiences, self-quotation extends the use of third-person narration as a distancing device; the strategy helps this writer, as it did others, move between the two perspectives demanded by historical narration and even confront painful memories. In part as a result of this strategy, narratives of this type convey the sense of a mature personality, not at the mercy of past events but able to transform them, and thus grow, through the power of language.

Some students demonstrate a similar self-consciousness by placing themselves in relation to a broader category, either generalizing from their experience or distinguishing themselves from others in the category. ("Most teenagers can't wait to live on their own, but for Janet it was just the opposite.") This strategy is often an opening move in the narrative, a device which introduces its central figure to the reader and, if effective, awakens interest in the account to follow. A variation of this strategy is illustrated by the following writer, a young woman who emigrated from Portugal at the beginning of her high school years:



To a poor girl like Lucinda, being born during the war in Angola, and growing up without much of a future, the learning that someday she would go to Canada was like a dream come true.

This student's awareness of how opportunities are determined by circumstances is sustained throughout the narrative, as she waits for her father to send for her and at times speculates on the path her life might have taken: "It is uncertain to know whether Lucinda would have actually continued her education any further than high school, if she had remained in Portugal." Yet she never allows a clichéd pattern of immigrant success to overwhelm the more idiosyncratic realities of her story. Graduating with poor grades from high school, she decides to work rather than attend the university, until a long-awaited visit to Portugal renews her ambitions:

Her friends kept telling her how different she was. Before the departure to Canada, she was outgoing and friendly, but after four years, she looked sad and confused. This was how her friends who grew up with her categorized her, and Lucinda knew that this was true. She was changed for unknown reasons. The only clear thought in her mind was to take advantage of the chance that she was given.

Regrettably, much remains below the surface here—the writer's comparison of her opportunities to her friends' more limited options, material circumstances, the strain of four years in a new language and culture—but the dialectical movement among others' observations, the writer's awareness that she "fits" into a category, and her maturing sense of self lends force to the otherwise familiar conclusion.

In short, the strategies students used to fulfill the requirements for this assignment often gave them a means to tackle difficult issues, to address the formation of their characters, and to gain in self-knowledge without crossing the boundaries between private and public. The assignment encouraged them to probe clichéd conclusions and explore alternative possibilities as a matter of narrative logic and plausibility, but it did so without pushing students to disclose what would better remain private. Our emphasis was on the narrative as a construction: we wanted students to confront the

assumption that each life has a single, “accurate” story to tell and to see that one individual’s experiences might yield many coherent stories—just as good history writing does. We wanted to increase students’ consciousness of the possible meanings of their patterns of behaviour over the years.

## **Writing to Learn and Learning to Write in the Disciplines: Some Final Observations**

An expressivist element in composition studies today . . . sees the teaching of disciplinary conventions as a denial of students’ “authentic voice” and a rejection of the possibility of a true academic community in a reformed institution, where knowledge and discourse will not be controlled by literary elites. Expressivists . . . argue that students should be encouraged to do personal writing . . . instead of learning to write in the public genres of the disciplines . . . . Proponents of writing in the disciplines argue that . . . the student’s experience, individual and personal, must interact in complex ways with disciplinary discourse, communal and public, in order for meaningful learning—and writing—to take place in academia. Britton, Maimon, Fulwiler, and Charles Bazerman, as well as other WAC proponents . . . . agree that learning to write is part of a dialectic between self and society, which can transform both, but only if students learn how disciplines are constituted through their discourse. (Russell 294–95)

A division among supporters of WAC has been evident in the periodical literature and at composition conferences for the past several years (Kirscht, Levine, and Reiff, 371). The passage from Russell’s *Writing in the Academic Disciplines, 1870–1990* describes one aspect of this division, the split between supporters of WID and expressivists who claim that a WID approach encourages “conformity and submission” (Spellmeyer, qtd. in Russell 294). His account of expressivist criticisms of WID could, of course, be supplemented with an account of WID criticisms of expressivism; some proponents of WID might argue, for instance, that well-intentioned attempts to develop students’ confidence by letting them write about “what they know” may

only lure them into a false sense of security about their readiness for the university.

This debate over expressivism is not the only dichotomy affecting attitudes towards WID. The distinction between insider and outsider knowledge seems to have become absolute, not only for many of our colleagues in the disciplines but also for some writing-to-learn advocates. The result has been skepticism about whether WID can work at all. From this perspective, “reformed” English teachers and compositionists (which is to say most of us in the field) have no business trying to teach students how to write like sociologists or biologists or historians, since we are “outsiders” to such disciplines, ill-equipped to shed light on their discursive practices and ways of thinking. If the main goal of writing instruction at university is the acquisition of disciplinary discourses, such critics of WID say, we should probably turn the teaching of writing over to those inside the disciplines.

Territorial disputes, institutional reforms, and other matters having to do with academic politics are probably just as responsible for these divisions as curricular theory or pedagogy (Russell; Kinneavy, 68). But whatever the reasons for their emergence, these divisions between insider and outsider knowledge, between writing to learn and learning to write in the disciplines, and between “authentic,” personal discourse and disciplinary discourse seem not only theoretically simplistic but pedagogically counterproductive. They are based on what Joan Graham has called a “badly formulated opposition—a wrongly forced choice” (Russell, 294), on what Elaine Maimon, speaking at the 1990 CCC Conference, called a “false dichotomy” (Kirscht, Levine, and Reiff, 372).

Graham and Maimon are not alone in pointing out the falseness of these divisions. As the passage from Russell indicates, other respected WID proponents such as Bazerman have never argued that students should learn to suppress their own voices; on the contrary, they often agree with expressivists on this point, claiming that it helps students appropriate disciplinary discourses rather than merely imitating them (Bazerman, 1992, 63–64). However, they also insist that a voice which ignores the language and culture of its auditors is a voice without influence. Bazerman recommends that we investigate “the dynamics of the texts with which our students work” not because he thinks students should mimic professionals but because studies of disciplinary discourses can “enable students

to enter into disciplines as empowered speakers rather than as conventional followers of accepted practice, running as hard as they can just to keep up appearances" (67). Similarly, WID proponents often recognize the dangers of reading disciplinary discourse from the outside, but they also believe that outsiders have a perspective that insiders lack; rather than being an impediment, the knowledge of compositionists and rhetoricians is a potential asset in guiding students in the acquisition of disciplinary discourse.

The recent appearance of a spate of WID-focused literature may suggest that others are coming around to Bazerman's point of view and that, within the fields of rhetoric and composition, attitudes towards the teaching of disciplinary discourses are changing. We need to realize that the insider-outsider dichotomy is not absolute, that the boundaries between disciplines are permeable; and as we go on learning from rhetoric of inquiry research about the ways of thinking and/or writing in other disciplines, we need to draw on what has long been useful in our own. This paper has described an assignment which combines discipline-specific insights derived from research into historiography with tools and techniques long used in composition classes. We would like to believe that it bridges the gap between WID and writing-to-learn.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Surprisingly few examples of first-year composition assignments that bridge the gap between a learning-to-write-in-the-disciplines approach and a writing-to-learn approach are yielded by surveying several of the journals likely to contain such reports. Of note are William W. Wright's "Students as Ethnographers: Encouraging Authority," CCC 18 (1991): 103-113 and Miriam Dempsey Page's "'Thick Description' and a Rhetoric of Inquiry: Freshmen and Their Major Fields," *The Writing Instructor* (1987): 141-150. A number of articles refer in passing to the pedagogical implications of WID or "rhetoric of inquiry" research. Slightly more common are bridging assignments for upper-level composition courses and courses in the disciplines. See, for example, Hannah Karp Laipson's brief description of four discipline-specific assignments that "merge rhetorical considerations with the writing-to-learn approach" (51) and Lee D. Millar Bidwell's account of an adaptable writing assignment "that helps students develop a sociological imagination" (402).

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this article, we use the first person plural for convenience. In fact, BT originally designed the assignment for the university's first writing course linked with history, which he taught in the fall term of 1993-94. We then reviewed the assignment together and revised it, placing greater emphasis on "broader historical forces." Each of us went on to use the assignment in linked courses over the following two years. The essays from which this article draws were collected over the three-year period from five sections of the course.

<sup>3</sup> A good discussion of this debate is provided in "There is no King in Israel," the final chapter of Novick's *That Noble Dream*. See also Easthope, La Capra, and Stone.

<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, Marius strongly defends the use of narrative. As he says in *A Short Guide to Writing about History*, "narratives are the bedrock of history. Without narratives, history would die as a discipline." (69)—a passage quoted in our assignment description.

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