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An Observation: Exploring and Extracting Literacy Narratives in English Composition I

As a first-year teaching assistant in the English MA program here at MSU, I am currently observing and assisting Latoya Bogard as she teaches Spring-semester English Composition I. We—the first-year TAs—will be teaching English Composition I in the next academic year, so getting to observe and participate in the class of a seasoned instructor is, I think, important to our future performance as educators.¹ In observing and participating in Latoya’s class, I have already been able to see how the dynamic reactions and discussions of Latoya’s students are different from those of the Basic English group I taught last semester (the only class I have taught to date). In many ways, however, the two different student groups with which I have experience are similar.

In teaching Basic Composition, I was working with students who had experienced great difficulty in writing in their pasts—Latoya’s class this semester, being in the Spring, is likely comprised predominantly of students who have either just taken and passed Basic Composition or who have just taken and are repeating English Composition I. In other words, many of Latoya’s students have had great difficulty either with writing itself or engaging in the academic setting provided for the improvement of their writing. Because of the need for these students to find an engaging teacher—or for such a teacher to find the right way to engage the students—I want to examine Latoya’s inviting and stern-yet-friendly style of educating and the methods she

¹ Latoya has given me permission to write this observation of her teaching methods. She laughed when responding, hoping that I would not put anything “bad” in the paper—she has no need to worry about that, though, as I have been quite impressed by her professionalism and teaching methods through the semester so far.

has used in class in getting her students started on their literacy narratives. I think that examining Latoya's teaching of the literacy narrative will help me to locate and frame my own ideas about how these reticent writers may be invited into an academic community (the classroom) in which they are both able and willing to express themselves and to explore their own methods of communication in writing. In my examination of Latoya's teaching, I also want to see how she balances both process and product and writer and audience in her discussion and how she is able to implement these topics in her engaging teaching style in order to get her students to see their options and their goals more clearly and with less apprehension.

During the first two weeks of class², the students in Latoya's Composition I class started working on their literacy narratives by way of introduction to the genre. Of course, Latoya did not simply hand the students an assignment and tell them to go read it. She opened up the discussion on literacy narratives by first discussing writing. She questioned the class, asking students to raise their hands in response to questions such as, "Do you like to write?" and "How many of you hate writing?" She used these questions to launch into a discussion with the students—not a lecture, but an exchange of ideas—on "what happens when you write." She discussed with the students how writing can lead to self-discovery and growth, "even power."

Following the discussion on the benefits of writing, Latoya wrote the words *literacy* and *narrative* on the board, proceeding to lead the class through a discussion of what literacy is and on the nature and structure of narrative. The students were very responsive during this portion of the discussion, adding in their own ideas of what constitutes literacy—including a conversation on iPhone literacy—and then adding their own ideas of narrative, which Latoya helped them organize on the board into categories of introduction (with exposition, background information,

² This paper will include discussions and assignments from three days of a one-hour-long class. I wanted to cover the Latoya's teaching of the literacy narrative more fully than addressing what she did in one hour of class with it.

character, and situation), rising action (with conflict, details, and dialogue), climax, falling action, and conclusion. Organizing the students' discussion on the board while gently leading them with questions, Latoya used Burke's pentad to guide the students through looking at the parts of the narrative set on the board, showing the students how identifying act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose can help in, as Erika Lindemann puts it, "examining human motivation dramatically" (*A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers* 54). For the purposes of the class and this assignment, though, Latoya's description of this examining act related directly to the literacy narrative assignment, examining "our growth as users of language and as human beings."³

For the next class, Latoya had the students start looking at literacy narratives by reading from Frederick Douglass's account of first setting out to achieve and then acquiring his own literacy. The students were supposed to read the narrative for homework and, judging from class discussion, most of the students actually read their work before class—this made for a very lively conversation in class. The students had a journaling assignment due before class on MyCourses (responding to questions from the *Guide to Freshman Composition* for the Frederick Douglass piece on teaching himself to read. I think Latoya is wise to assign the journal entries in this way, in that having the journal entries due online discourages students' thinking that they can wait until the last day of class to "gather" all of their journal entries (or write them). This way the journals—which Latoya has let her students know serve as prewriting, generating material—are composed before the class discussion. (I have noticed that this method of journal assigning seems to help—many of Latoya's students, although mostly the reticent kind, are generally prepared for discussion, although more so on days when there are journals due.)

³ At this point, Latoya noted the similarities between essay and narrative development, illustrating for the students how the basic need for a beginning, middle, and end is the same for both "creative" and academic writing.

Latoya began by reminding the students that literacy narratives use story (in chronological order) to illustrate both for the writer and the reader “our growth as users of language and as human beings.” Along with the students, she compiled a list on the board of possible story types that could be literacy narratives, including learning to read or to enjoy (or hate) reading; learning to write or to enjoy (or hate) writing; learning a lesson in maturity (its own kind of literacy); and helping someone else learn how to read, write, or to use a new technology. She seemed to do a very good job of not making the students feel trapped in the topic, giving them plenty of room to choose their own subjects. Latoya, in line with suggestions of Donald Murray [that the writer should choose his or her “own subject” (5)] and Richard Graves [that “good writing has its origins and roots in the writer’s soul” (134)].⁴

The class seemed to get into discussing Douglass’s ingenious methods for “tricking” people into helping him learn—particularly his showing white boys how he could write certain letters he had learned from observing others write them, and “betting” that the other boys couldn’t do it better. The students laughed when someone in the class described Douglass’s method as “sneaky.” Latoya used this comment as a teaching opportunity by leading into questions about Douglass’s credibility. By asking the students if Douglass had been wrong in “tricking” the boys into helping him, Latoya was able to direct the discussion toward an evaluation of Douglass’s methods, motives, and purposes, ending with what seemed to be a general consensus among that the students that Douglass’s “sneaky” tricks were not unethical, but rather admirable—they seemed to see the great need that Douglass had. In one journal entry, a student had responded that Douglass’s narrative made her “feel bad about [her] own writing,”

⁴ Latoya implements several other ideas that appear in Murray’s chapter in *Cross Talk*, including the idea of “discovery through language” (4) apparent in both of her lectures on literacy narrative and also in her discussion of the “ethical choices” (4) that Douglass makes both in acquiring literacy and in writing his narrative.

and the topic did come up in class that Douglass had worked hard for his learning. Through the discussion, the students verbalized appreciation for that fact.

One thing that Latoya did that I thought was particularly good was telling her own literacy narrative in the form of an anecdote for the class. She talked about having, as a child, signed up for a mail-order book program through a magazine without her parents permission and, when her parents received a bill for her sixty-dollar dictionary, she talked about how she got in trouble for that. The students seemed to enjoy the story, laughing and responding to Latoya's questions and comments throughout. She then got some of the students to tell their own literacy narratives—not by asking them for the stories, though. Latoya prompted the students with questions including the following: "*Did any of you ever have a good experience with reading? Did you like to read when you were little? How did you learn to read? Why don't you like reading?*" In their responses, several of the students (perhaps unwittingly) told small versions of their literacy narratives, which Latoya pointed out that they had told after that part of the discussion was done. One student talked about her uncle's embarrassing use of "bad" English. Another student talked about her experiences tutoring a young boy, experiences through which she, too, learned. Still another student told a particularly personal story, concerning his not learning to read until he was embarrassed by other students making fun of him for his illiteracy over time. I thought this was a particularly brave student to put forth this kind of story for the class, and also a student who obviously felt safe enough in the classroom to share an important and personal aspect of his life.

I liked the way Latoya gently tricked them into working with the literacy narrative without being demanding or putting them on the spot. The students already seem to feel comfortable discussing serious issues openly in the class—I think that the class discussion really

showed that—with some students telling very personal stories of their literacy and sharing them with everyone. After the discussion, Latoya brought up the female student's embarrassing uncle, relating that student's story to the reading for the next class (from Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*), noting the similarities between Maya's embarrassment and the student's.

Coming to the end of this class session, Latoya then reminded the students about the journal responses to Angelou that were due for the next class—also noting that the journal entries the students write are to help them with their writing in the class. While going through discussion on these two days and on the following day (concerning Angelou), Latoya would constantly relate the journaling and reading to the writing to come. Whenever a discussion led to a moment that could be turned toward composition through the reading discussion, Latoya would interject into the discussion a “*See? You can do this in your own writing, too.*” or a “*Now how could you use that?*” in order to get the students to see the link between their reading and journaling assignments and their writing assignments.⁵ I admire her efforts to combine process and product in her teaching—she is able to discuss both the written product and the writing process freely, switching between them when the discussion (even if she led it there) comes to a point at which she can relate the reading and the writing.

Overall, I have been impressed by Latoya's teaching. She does very well at keeping her class on point in discussion while not sounding controlling, and she also does very well at inviting her students to speak. When she needs to be stern, she is, but she is friendly and very open in telling her own stories, thus giving the students an atmosphere in which they feel safe

⁵ After the day of discussion on Angelou, the next class period covered drafting and turning the experiences that had come up in discussion, journaling, and prewriting into the students' own literacy narratives. Also on that day, Latoya covered the relationships between writers and audiences more thoroughly, although she had been saying throughout the discussion for the three days covered in this paper that the writer's job is “to get his or her point across” to an audience, keeping in mind that it is the *writer's point*, and that a writer should not misconstrue his or her own purpose and meaning to suit an audience but should instead figure out how best to relate his or her own purpose and meaning to that audience.

telling their own. I admire Latoya's methods of assigning journals and readings that relate directly to the literacy narrative assignment and are used as texts that teach historical and ethical lessons but also uplift the self and prize self-discovery through literacy. I also think that, in teaching this unit, Latoya has been able to keep a good balance of things that tend to extremes in the theory that we have read for Composition Pedagogy: she does not focus too much on writer or reader, process or product, convention or creativity—instead she focuses on all of these areas, thus presenting a more well-rounded lesson (and a more applicable one, I think) than would otherwise be the case if she were to adhere to a one-sided teaching method.

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