

THE MANY PEDAGOGIES OF MEMOIR: A STUDY OF THE PROMISE OF TEACHING  
MEMOIR IN COLLEGE COMPOSITION

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines the promise and problems of memoir in the pedagogy and practices of teaching memoir in college composition. I interviewed three University of Central Florida instructors who value memoir in composition, and who at the time of this study, were mandated to teach memoir in their composition courses. The interviews focus on three main points of interest: (1) the instructors' motivations behind their teaching of memoir, (2) how these instructors see memoir functioning in their classes, and (3) what these instructors hope their students will gain in the process of writing the memoir essay. By analyzing these interviews, I was better able to understand the three instructors' pedagogical choices and rationales for teaching memoir in their classes. I have also collected data and research from scholarly journal articles, books, and from my experiences teaching memoir in the composition classroom. This thesis challenges the widely accepted notion that memoir and the personal in composition scholarship, pedagogy, and teaching practices are “‘touchy-feely,’ ‘soft,’ ‘unrigorous,’ ‘mystical,’ ‘therapeutic,’ and ‘Mickey Mouse’” ways of meaning-making and teaching writing (Tompkins 214). My findings show that memoir in the classroom is richer and far more complex than it might appear at first, and that the teaching of memoir in composition can, in fact, be greater than the memoir essay itself. Even though each instructor I interviewed values the personal and believes memoir belongs in composition curriculum, it turns out that none of these instructors' core reasons for teaching memoir was so his or her students could master writing the memoir essay, although this was important; rather the memoir essay ultimately served in the instructors' classrooms as a conduit through which they ultimately could teach more diverse writing skills and techniques as well as intellectual concepts that truly inspired them. Since the teaching of memoir seems to be even

more dynamic and versatile in process and pedagogy than many of the other essay genres traditionally taught in college composition, this thesis makes recommendations for how memoir needs to be viewed, written about, and taught in order to harness the promise of this essay genre more consistently in the discussion of composition pedagogy and in the teaching of memoir to our students in the composition classroom.

Thompkins, Jane. *A Life in School: What the Teacher Learned*. Reading: Addison-Wesley. 1996. Print.

This thesis is dedicated to my wonderful husband Robbie,  
to our beautiful children Elliot and Stella,  
and to my Mom, Laura.  
You each inspire me in your own amazing ways.

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## CHAPTER 1

*I write for the usual reasons writers write about anything important: to get at the truth; to make sense of things that don't make sense; to set the record straight; to tell a good story.*

–Lynn Z. Bloom, “Living to Tell the Tale:  
The Complicated Ethics of Creative Nonfiction”

### *Introduction*

I'm the mom of a beautiful 3-month-old who has quit taking naps during the day unless he's held. He will fall asleep in my arms or while my husband, Robbie, dances with him, but as we attempt to put him down, he awakens. I'm exhausted. Robbie is exhausted. On top of trying to maintain a home and tend to our son and my marriage, I am writing my thesis. It's not like I was crazy and began my thesis when I was pregnant. I have been “writing” my thesis at least a year before I even met Robbie. It has become what feels like my endless project.

Our son, Elliot, is loving and smiles more than any person I've ever known. He is healthy in every sense of the word, except for having a type of infant gastroesophageal reflux. His pediatrician calls it “silent reflux” because Elliot doesn't always spit up like most babies with the most common form of reflux; the adjective “silent” describes how you can just barely hear the stomach acid sliding up and then back down his esophagus, burning with each pass. We're lucky it was diagnosed. In short, he hurts. This is not uncommon. Robbie holds him in his arms and tries to do his best to soothe what is impossible to soothe while I work on my thesis. Elliot arches his back over and over again. It's painful to watch so I try to throw myself back into my paper. It's understandable why I can't seem to write an intelligible sentence.

With tear-dampened eyes, Elliot calms. The reflux seems to have subsided for the moment. I view this as my window of opportunity to share with Robbie what I have so far.



I explain to him that I'm working on the history section of my paper and that I feel unsure whether my sentences made any sense.

I read a few paragraphs aloud.

It's true. The sentences were convoluted and messy. I felt embarrassed by my writing. I asked what he thought. Robbie said I needed to introduce the history part and he gives me a sample, pseudo-sentence to get me started. Of course! Why didn't I think of that?!

So, in a moment of clarity, I write, "In order to understand the role of memoir in composition pedagogy, it's important that we take a moment to briefly examine the history of academic discourse and how the personal became a part of scholarly language and composition pedagogy."

I read it aloud to him.

"Sounds good, but shouldn't you take out 'we'?" Robbie asks as he repositions Elliot in his arms.

My first thought is, *but this thesis is about the personal*. I look at the sentence again. "No," I say, "I'm speaking with my audience. Besides," I add, "this thesis is about the personal, I should be able to use 'we,' don't you think?"

"Yeah, I guess so." Elliot begins to cry again. Robbie gets up with him and walks down the hall. Walking around the house helps to distract Elliot from the pain and sometimes calms him a bit. I think for a moment and begin to write.

When I write, my first instinct is to compose my thoughts in first-person, but as a student of traditional teachers in secondary and postsecondary institutions, I've been taught over and over again that it's in bad form to write in first-person when writing academic essays for

school—I was told it makes my writing appear subjective, and as a result, my voice loses some of its credibility in the eyes of my audience.

I know many students experience this. Writing in first-person tends to be for many students their natural way of expressing themselves. As a result, teachers need to teach these students how to write themselves out of their work. Some of these students eventually become writing teachers themselves, and in turn, in good faith and with great conviction, these teachers now teach their students the need to write themselves out of their essays to prepare them for writing academic essays in college coursework, which is when writing in academic discourse for an academic audience most matters.

I began my thesis—the most important academic paper I have ever written in my life—with a story from my life, partly to take a stand on the issue of the personal narrative and partly because this moment in my life caused me to pause and face just how ingrained it is for Robbie and me to write ourselves out of our writing, especially in a high-stakes academic paper for an important academic audience. Robbie, who is a teacher himself and also a great writer, was trying to “help” me to improve my writing by removing the “we”—the author and audience—and revise the sentence so that it mimicked the more author-absent style we were taught to write in school.

I could have agreed with Robbie’s suggestion and written: “In order to understand the role of memoir in composition pedagogy, it is important to briefly examine the history of academic discourse and how the personal became a part of scholarly language and composition pedagogy.” And this sounds good. Objective even. But this kind of writing, especially in a thesis about use of the personal narrative and the teaching of memoir in composition, seems dry and

impersonal to me, creating an illusion that there is no one behind my words. But that's really what it is—an illusion. My name is Melissa Lee and I am writing this thesis, and I am writing this thesis for you with the greatest of hopes that you will read my thesis and feel you have gained something from your experience with my text. I want you to feel included in this academic journey and a story or two about me might help us to connect better—in a sense, you already have a piece of me to take with you as you continue to read this chapter and those following this one, too. And it is for this reason that I began my thesis with a story from my life about writing this thesis and have included you in my writing.

We are a story-telling species. We relate to narratives and to the people who tell them. As Gian S. Pagnucci explains in *Living the Narrative Life*, personal narratives “connect what we know to what we’re trying to understand. They make things personal, give things meaning. They make things matter” (9). The personal narrative creates a space for us to enter into our scholarship, to share the same space with our thoughts and our audience. It returns us to our rightful place where we can put our thoughts into context with ourselves, which gives us the opportunity to show the significance or the origin of these thoughts. It gives us agency and the ability to share our knowledge and understandings in a more natural way, in a way that may make more sense to us, and we hope, our audience, too.

My thesis examines memoir, the personal narrative, and the pedagogical choices of three writing instructors who teach memoir in their composition courses. However, the instructors’ decision to include memoir in their course curriculum was not entirely their own, rather it was part of the composition program’s overall course curriculum. These instructors, though, value memoir in composition, and each has chosen different ways to implement memoir in his or her

classes, and although it's mandated that they teach memoir as one of their four core essays, each has found different ways and reasons to teach it. This chapter will give some background on the history and conflict of the personal narrative in composition and its emerging presence in the form of memoir in composition curriculum and pedagogy.

### *Maybe It's Just Trendy*

In order to understand the role of memoir in composition curriculum and pedagogy, it's important that we take a moment to briefly review the history of academic discourse and examine how the personal became a part of composition scholarship and pedagogy.

Influenced by Reason and the Enlightenment, American scholars adopted the style of academic discourse used and accepted by German scholars in the mid 1800s. Candace Spigelman explains in her article "Argument and Evidence in the Case of the Personal" that writing in this already established style of academic discourse became especially important during the time "American literary studies emerged as a discipline at the turn of the century, [since] it sought credibility in a scientific model in which literary criticism tried to appear objective, factual, and impersonal" (66).

Jane E. Hindman writes in her essay "Making Writing Matter: Using 'The Personal' to Recover[y] an Essential[ist] Tension in Academic Discourse," that in our attempt to bring credibility and discipline to our academic discourse, we have effectively viewed ourselves as "unimportant subjects" and have learned how to write ourselves out of our text in "what Clifford Geertz has called 'author-evacuated prose[,] [which] misrecognizes the events of our daily lives because it willfully ignores the social construction of our experiences, our knowledge, even our very bodies, and likewise dispenses with the material aspects of composing and revising our

lives” (89). According to Robert J. Connors, as Anne Ruggles Gere explains in her essay “Revealing Silence: Rethinking the Personal,” personal writing “emerged at the turn of the [twentieth] century in reaction against the more abstract topics derived from classical rhetoric, but they have assumed an increased value and volume in recent years” (204).

David Wallace identifies in his essay “Transcending Normativity: Difference Issues in ‘College English,’” the marginalized voices of “race, gender, class, sexual identity, religion/spirituality, and physical or mental/emotional abledness” (503), which decades later began to appear to carve out a space for themselves in the forms of reflection and personal narratives in scholarship, challenging what Geertz terms as “author-evacuated prose” and the accepted style of academic writing. These marginalized scholars saw a connection between their lives and their studies (Hindman 89). They were not just observers giving an account of what they had learned; rather they became interlocutors and acknowledged the value of themselves as meaningful contributors to furthering the depths of academic conversations by intricately weaving their life experiences into the fabric of their writings. They believed that by including pieces of relevant experiences in the writings, they made room for themselves in their scholarship, in their fields, and used personal narratives to tell the stories behind how and why they have arrived to their certain understandings of meaning-making and knowledge. This has led to the rise of what Margaret K. Willard-Traub refers to in her article “Reflection in Academe: Scholarly Writing and the Shifting Subject” as “a proliferation of autobiographically inflected scholarship” (425). She notes that “during the past two decades [...] the turn toward reflective writing across the disciplines attests to the influence of cultural studies, feminist studies, and epistemologies that insists on the local and the ‘everyday’ not only as valid objects of inquiry but

also as valid sources of authority” (425). Seeing authority in “the local and the ‘everyday’” in the creation of knowledge in these disciplines has given a new generation of scholars a place where they can share experiences and help (re)shape our perceptions so we can better appreciate how new understandings in their fields intersect with the world in which we live (Willard-Traub 425). By sharing experiences through personal narratives, we can vicariously experience through their stories how the ordinary influences esoteric concepts in scholarship and vice versa.

In the field of creative writing, memoir serves to establish what Phillip Lopate calls in his essay “Reflection and Retrospection: A Pedagogic Mystery Story” a “dual perspective” (143). Lopate explains that when writing memoir, the author aspires to

establish a dual perspective that will allow the reader to participate in the experience as it was lived (the confusions and misapprehensions of the child one was, say), while conveying the sophisticated wisdom of one’s current self. The second perspective, the author’s retrospective of a more mature intelligence to interpret the past, is not merely an obligation but a privilege, an opportunity. In any autobiographical narrative, whether memoir or personal essay, the heart of the matter often shines through those passages where the writer analyzes the meaning of his or her experience (143).

This is the complexity of memoir as compared to a personal narrative where one’s experience is recounted or shared with the readers. In memoir, a “dual perspective” with a voice of intelligence and wisdom is necessary and present to “interpret the past” and, in a way, retell the story from a more mature perspective (Lopate 143).

Memoir, as a form of creative nonfiction, has received greater interest by writing instructors and scholars in college composition alike. So then, as Wendy Bishop asks in her essay, “Suddenly Sexy: Creative Nonfiction Rear-Ends Composition:” “Is it suddenly sexy to be teaching creative nonfiction because [...] it’s there, or does the genre need us and we teachers of writing [...] need the genre” (256)? Maybe. Naturally, when teachers of composition write the personal in their scholarship it will likely emerge as practice and pedagogy in their classrooms.

### *It’s Not the Destination, it’s the Journey*

For centuries, scholars have valued classical approaches to meaning-making and traditionally structured essays in scholarship, but the inclusion of the personal, or creative nonfiction, in scholarship is a relatively new practice. Only recently, within the past 40 years, has the personal narrative’s association with composition gained momentum. The Donald M. Murray collaborative learning camp and the Peter Elbow early expressivist camp are credited with introducing the personal narrative into composition curricula, pedagogy, and practice during the 1970’s. This idea of exploring the self to arrive at knowledge and new understandings is not new, however; according to James Berlin, its origins date back to Plato’s belief in first understanding the self before locating and understanding “Truth” within the world. But, in Plato’s “Allegory of a Cave,” the main character understands self and sees sunlight and nature, something for which no one in the cave has experienced before, and yet he still fails to explain his experience of reality to others. This philosophy has changed a bit in time. According to Neo-platonic rhetoric and philosophers from the Romantic era, truth—with a lower case “t”—can only be known to the writer and can never be accurately relayed to the audience. Is it naïve to think that the personal

can communicate “truths,” even with shades of inaccuracy, to an audience, especially through marginalized voices, which others may have never experienced themselves?

The answer to this question for some must be “no,” because personal narrative pedagogy thrives today in composition studies—this chapter’s epigraph is an example. Interestingly, Lynn Z. Bloom’s reasons to write are the same reason scholars write academic texts, “to get at the truth; to make sense of things that don’t make sense; to set the record straight; to tell a good story.” Could personal narratives and traditional academic discourse be two pathways that lead to the same destination? If this is true, then the tension might not be about the destination at all, but rather in how we get there.

### *Scholarship and Clash of The Personal*

The field of composition is a relatively new field of study in English in comparison to literary studies, which is usually the most sexy, academic, and prestigious field of study in English departments. In order for any new field to establish itself in scholarly circles, it needs to develop its own terminology, epistemology, and rhetoric. The struggle over direction and the field’s epistemology is evident in “The Death of Composition as an Intellectual Discipline,” which is Gary A. Olson’s response to Wendy Bishop’s article “Places to Stand: The Reflective Writer-Teacher-Writer in Composition,” in which Bishop encourages the teaching and publishing of expressivist rhetoric in composition. Olson claims the personal—both ideologically and epistemologically—conflicts with the more traditional approaches to the making of knowledge valued by scholars in other respected and established academic fields. Therefore, if our field wishes to become an influential intellectual field on par with literary studies, then our field’s language and meaning-making must be shared in a prescribed discourse that many



scholars from already established and well-funded fields acknowledge and legitimately value. The field of composition seems to be in a similar position where American universities found themselves in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, needing to establish themselves as a source of authoritative scholarship within its own circles as well as with other fields and other scholars from around the world. Scholars and teachers of composition are also entrusted with preserving and perpetuating the valued styles of academic discourse with nearly every student on campus. As a result, how we teach written discourse and define what constitutes valid meaning-making also determines our value within the university system.

Another concern for use of the personal in academic discourse is that to many it appears to weaken the appearance of scholarship in a field already struggling for intellectual respect and funding within the university system. According to Robert L. Roots' essay, "Naming Nonfiction (A Polyptych)," Roots suggests that by including personal narrative in scholarship and in the teaching of composition, scholars might even further distance themselves from using the personal narrative out of fear of further marginalizing their scholarship in an already marginalized field. Roots explains:

Tacking the adjective 'creative' in front of the noun 'nonfiction' may help link it to other forms of 'creative writing' as a literary genre but it also helps to marginalize it in the same way that creative writing is marginalized in most English departments—as something chiefly of interest to an artsy contingent of student and faculty writers rather than to the student and faculty *littérateurs*, scholars and critics, and readers who make up the majority of the department (246).

Yes, there is artistry to personal narratives and these narratives are present in essays for insight as well as interest. However, if personal narratives, such as “creative nonfiction,” are officially accepted and adopted by all in composition, Roots projects that this could further disenfranchise the field and its programs in English departments already fighting for funds at universities.

With that said, the personal narrative and memoir essay receive most of their nods from scholars and instructors who already value personal rhetoric in academically-g geared writing courses. Even though scholars debate the personal and have documented their support or discord on the subject in many of our field’s texts, this controversy goes deeper than a clash over the personal as a style of presenting research or composition pedagogy—epistemology also seems to be at the heart of this debate.

Sparks alight when the personal narrative as epistemology collides with the more traditional approach of using author-absent discourse and sources for academic meaning-making. Pinpointing and agreeing upon epistemology is particularly significant in composition today since composition is a marginalized field, and the survival of composition as an intellectual discipline depends upon whether or not our epistemology is cohesive and is accepted by members in the academy. Stephen M. North expresses concern about the acceptance of the personal in the field of composition in his text, *The Making of Knowledge in Composition: Portrait of an Emerging Field*. North believes that the issue of the personal has yet to be resolved in our field mainly because composition as a discipline of academic study in the university is relatively new. As a result, he claims that composition scholars and practitioners “spend an inordinate amount of time defining the field, categorizing it, classifying it, and critiquing it rather than producing or contributing to the ‘literature of composition research’” (196). North

speculates, “this tendency stems from...a desire to make our subject, whatever it may be, learnable,” and “as a field, we simply don’t get down and do enough primary research” (196). Ultimately, North explains, the compulsion to define ourselves and determine which epistemic approaches are of more value, rather than to conduct studies, is because “we are so pedagogically oriented (the nice reason), or maybe because we are ‘insecure’ (the nastier reason)” (197). As a result, we get tied up in delineating our field’s theory and its “chosen” epistemology that it has divided our field and at times overshadowed the study of the field itself.

North’s claim is remarkably similar to what Jane E. Hindman wrote in her “Introduction” to *College English’s* “Special Focus” journal volume on personal writing. However, one significant difference between Hindman’s and North’s texts is that Hindman focuses specifically on the personal in composition. She suggests the problem with the personal is not in the personal itself but in that “our notion of ‘the personal’ has evolved from such diverse contexts” and as a result, further divides rather than unifies the scholars in our field (35). In our attempts to strengthen our discipline’s epistemic grooves and to define our field, we have also created deeper chasms, and “our multiple and sometimes duplicitous understandings of [the personal] create confusion and powerful (and potentially pompous) political debates” (Hindman 35). Each rhetorical/epistemological group in our discipline has its own view on the definition, use, and place of the personal—and each group handles it in their own rhetorical/epistemological ways. These epistemic factions within the field are one problem of the personal in scholarship.

In a field that studies and composes theory to explore our language, writing, thought, and our humanity, Gian S. Pagnucci explains in *Living the Narrative Life* that we as a people think in stories and “it’s stories that excited [him] about writing” (6). While studying and teaching

composition, he wondered where the stories had gone, because he couldn't find them in many writing classes outside of creative writing classes. Maybe one reason for this is the presumed link between orality and storytelling. According to Walter J. Ong in his article "Some Psychodynamics of Orality," storytelling is a foundation of oral discourse and oral cultures, and many might at some level still associate storytelling with subjectivity and pre-literacy. Personal narratives, the telling of one's experience through stories, are in the spirit of orality. Ong contends that abstract thinking, however, the highest level of thought and the kind of thought desired in academic discourse, is most pure and present in abstract language—the kind of language commonly associated with academic discourse. Due to this oral culture/subjective stigma, allowing personal narratives in academia seems to undermine the objectivity in what is, and always will be, subjectivity in written discourse. This reinforces the notion that within the walls of the university, the most prestigious and valued of all discourses should be as unbiased as possible, and therefore written in an objective(-appearing), (seemingly) author-absent style.

And it's a shame too, Pagnucci continues, because stories are "[h]ow we talk. They form our governments, our religions, our cultures. [...] Stories are what make us human" (7). As a people who enjoy stories and learn from reflection, memoir-like writing would naturally capture our interest. Furthermore, if a core goal of composition is to teach reflective practices as a component of critical thinking and meaning-making, then according to scholars and teachers like Wendy Bishop, the personal is a good pedagogical choice.

One of the hurdles memoir seems to encounter in the composition classroom is ideological. Returning to Gian S. Pagnucci in his book *Living the Narrative Life*, Pagnucci identifies the academic essay as an ideological "sign of intellectual growth and achievement,"

regardless of the actual content contained within the essay (46). Since this style of writing experiences much use in the objective-seeking math and science-oriented fields, it is a discourse considered less biased in nature, more academic, and hence, more influential. Beyond this, anyone's ability to perform in this academic discourse gains him or her instant credibility—even if he or she loses it later by what they say. This is just another reason many composition teachers devote more time in shaping their students' writings to reflect the style, arrangement, and tone of privileged discourse. And with this in mind, it is understandable why composition teachers would object to using class time teaching any essay that deviates from or does not ostensibly lend itself to shaping students' command of this style of academic discourse.

Stephen M. Fishman and Lucille Parkinson McCarthy concur and suggest in their article, "Is Expressivism Dead? Reconsidering its Romantic Roots and its Relation to Social Constructionism," that some scholars believe that it is in the very language of "expressivism [which] disempowers students because it does not help them learn disciplinary and professional languages" (647). In Sharon Crowley's book *Composition in the University*, Crowley explains that composition programs that encourage expressivist teachings are not just misguided but out of sync with their universities' overall goals. She writes, "Universities are more fully (if not absolutely) committed to the research ideal, and composition teachers are the only teachers who are still asked to evaluate students' character rather than their mastery of a subject matter" (57). According to these scholars, the effect of teaching the personal and other expressivist approaches to meaning-making positions composition programs, scholars, and instructors, henceforth the entire field of composition, in what can appear to be a rather unessential and less academically rigorous category.

Contrary to North's and Hindman's stances, and in opposition of the new expressivist movement, Gary A. Olson claims that there is too much reliance on the personal and teaching of the personal as knowledge-making and knowledge-seeking in our field. In his article, "Death of Composition as an Intellectual Discipline," Olson argues, "while we still desire to learn more about the teaching of writing or about our writing processes, these are not the *only* intellectual concerns we have as a discipline" (24). As he sees it, new expressivist knowledge-seekers (for example, Wendy Bishop and "the Donald Murray types (those who see themselves first as 'writers' and who then try to teach their craft)" and "the Peter Elbow types (those who see themselves as 'teachers' and who then write about teaching)" publish the self's experience as academic support which blurs the distinction between what is and what is not considered "academic" and further marginalizes our field (25).

However, Pagnucci contends, as with any sign, "the [academic] essay has intellectual and academic value only because we [the academy] have assigned those values to it. We could, instead, have assigned those values to the well-written narrative. But we didn't" (46). As a result, the sacredness of expository academic discourse displaces all other genres, and the motivation for members of the field of composition to place this traditional style of discourse above all others is understandable. As with any academic institution or community, there is a natural drive for its members to want to increase their discourse's prestige; hence, the lowly value of the personal and memoir in composition.

There seems to be a (false?) perception in academia that use of the personal in academic discourse softens the author's authority, while more traditional forms of academic discourse appears exacting and strong, perhaps because it is "built upon a combative relationship between

writer and reader...an approach built around the logic of objectivist argumentation. Such an approach creates distance between writer and reader” (Pagnucci 68). Creating an authorial distance between writer and reader and an objective distance between writer and content is a critical component of writing in traditional academic discourse and is in opposition of what personal narratives in academic discourse usually intend to do. This poses a significant rationale problem for teaching memoir and the personal narrative in composition. Why teach students how to unite the writer and reader within the content when a major goal of traditional academic discourse is to achieve an impression of objectivity through the establishment of an authorial distance?

But what if we view memoir as a good pedagogical choice for our students in the composition classroom? Then memoir, as the vehicle through which the personal narrative is explored, would be a valuable contribution to the education of many first-year writing students. When first-year writers learn how to reflect upon their experiences, their awareness of self-constructs may deepen and result in more critical examinations of where they come from and what they believe and how all of this fits in with the arguments they are forming while they write. This examination is crucial for cultivating critical and thoughtful writers. However, all writing instructors do not consider memoir an effective pedagogical approach in teaching college composition. Some see this essay as a touchy-feely narrative uncritical in the teaching of composition skills and of what really matters to universities and in college instructional content. As a result, teaching memoir in composition courses can be considered problematic for many instructors, and as a result, actualizing memoir’s promise, especially in large composition programs becomes a much more complex matter.

### *Memoir in the Composition Classroom*

While packing up after teaching composition one day, a student approached me and asked if it would be “okay” if he used a personal experience to help illustrate his argument. He seemed so unsure, timid to even ask let alone incorporate his experience in his essay as evidentiary support for his position. Yet, this student knew there was value in his experience and credibility in speaking in his voice; he said he wanted to share what happened to him to help explain why he felt so strongly about his position, yet he paused and questioned himself. This troubles me to this day, but I understand his hesitancy.

As a graduate student writing this thesis, I’m convinced I need as much ethos as possible, and like my composition students, I find myself at times resisting the desire to write my personal narratives into my academic work for concern my thesis will lose some credibility with you and that my voice will lose some of its authority. I feel more sure of myself now, but at first, I found myself using Pagnucci and Bloom and other’s personal narratives as surrogates for me to bring in the personal while still safely writing in what Clifford Geertz calls “author-evacuated prose.” Even now, in my thesis about memoir and use of the personal, I am cautious when I write my experiences. The answer I gave to my student was, “If it works well, do it!” Like my former composition student, I found myself in the same position at a café with my advisor asking him for his permission to write myself into my thesis by shifting into first-person and including my own personal narratives.

So when my composition students asked, “May I use ‘I’ in my argument?” I understand. They, like myself, read scholarship and textbooks whose language is largely impersonal and seems to overflow with great authority, written by authors who are scholars in their field and



would not dream to reference or directly connect themselves or their experiences to the content of their writing.

This is why personal narrative taught as memoir in composition pedagogy can be a powerful tool in a first-year writing program. Teaching memoir in composition gives students permission to write themselves into their essays and examine themselves as text, in the personal. Although this examination of personal experiences might seem akin to reflective journaling, composing successful memoirs could be one of the most important essays a first-year student writes in his or her composition course.

John Trimbur explains in his composition textbook and reader *A Call to Write* that “successful memoirs make personal experiences significant to others.... A memoir aims for understanding—to help readers to come to terms with the writer’s experience of the past and its meanings for the present” (148). Connecting the readers with the past so that they may understand the significance of the present is a key distinction between reporting a personal event in an essay and writing an effective memoir. Successful memoirs do just that and require critical thought and significant consideration. If students can take something personal, then reveal how that personal is relevant and significant to their audience, they are developing the core strategies needed to create public resonance of a most challenging kind. Helping students to examine and then convey importance through their experiences and at a college level gives them the opportunity to write themselves back into their writing. On a personal and academic level, this can be a critical step for many students.

### *Implications*

In outlining this tension that is often drawn between memoir and the personal narrative and other more typically taught expository essays, I don't want to suggest that instructors within the same composition program either welcome or cast aside memoir and personal narrative in their courses. In my experience, composition instructors' perspectives are more complex. Of course, there are instructors who represent the endpoints of the spectrum: the ones who love the memoir, believe in it, even smuggle it in to their courses and teach it with gusto, and there are the ones who oppose teaching memoir and quietly don't include it even if their program's curriculum requires the teaching of it, hoping no one will notice. However, I believe most instructors fall somewhere in between.

I interviewed three University of Central Florida composition instructors who value the teaching of memoir in their Composition 1 classes. This thesis will examine their interviews and investigate the following questions:

- Why do composition instructors who value memoir teach this essay?
- What are these composition instructors' pedagogical approaches to teaching memoir?
- What value do these composition instructors see in memoir writing?
- Why is it important to these composition writing instructors whether or not their students can write effective memoirs?

If memoir is to gain greater status in composition practice and pedagogy, then I believe we need a better understanding of what it means to teach memoir in a composition curriculum. I believe this is especially true in composition programs at schools with Rhetoric and Composition programs, for it is in these schools that those who teach composition are more likely to write

articles about their teaching of memoir and the personal narrative and publish them in respected and much read journals, like *College Composition and Communication* and *College English*.

Please know that it is not my intention in this thesis to settle the larger debates of the personal in composition; rather, my focus is to investigate composition instructors' descriptions of memoir, their rationales and practices of teaching this essay genre, and how they convey the value of the personal to their students. This thesis will examine memoir through the perspectives of three instructors in particular who value and teach memoir in their composition courses, even though the curriculum mandates they include memoir in their first composition course as one of the four core essays. I hope to thereby bring some insight into how memoir is perceived and taught by composition instructors who value the teaching of this essay in their courses, and hopefully add to the conversation on the place of the personal narrative and memoir in composition.

## CHAPTER 2

*I even heard the other day as I walked down the hall, “I just don’t understand why we have them write memoir.”*

--Laura, “Interview with Laura”

### *Introduction*

Encouraging the teaching of memoir and the personal narrative in composition curricula causes a variety of reactions from scholars and instructors. Patricia A Sullivan professes delight for the presence of this expressive, creative essay; Gary A. Olson finds it a pointless waste of precious class time; and Wendy Bishop believes memoir’s creative nonfiction establishes a rich, reflective foundation like no other essay can in a composition course. As a result, memoir’s contribution to composition pedagogy differs depending upon whom one asks.

This chapter provides an opportunity to explore the pedagogy of the personal and perceptions of memoir in composition. The goal of this chapter is to synthesize scholarly perspectives on the personal and memoir as a creative nonfiction essay to prepare for Chapter 4, which will explore three University of Central Florida composition instructors’ pedagogies and rationales for teaching memoir in their Composition 1 classes.

### *Ridiculously Easy Essay*

I taught Composition 1 as a graduate teaching assistant (GTA). I remember learning in a course designed to prepare GTAs for teaching composition that in Composition 1, our program’s curriculum required us to teach four essays: memoir, commentary, review, and argument. I understood commentary, review, and argument, but I didn’t get why memoir was one of the four cores. I figured it must make sense to the composition instructors and to those who designed the

curriculum. But it seemed to me that the kinds of knowledge my students would likely be required to study and write about in their undergraduate courses would be the kinds they learned from textbooks and lecture, not likely to be influenced by or grounded in personal experiences.

As it turned out, my composition students did not expect to write memoir, either. They had been composing stories about their lives for many years, probably beginning as early as kindergarten by putting together storyboards of events or telling the stories that inspired their drawings. As such, I was sure they were comfortable with storytelling, and I imagined many believed that they should be spending their seat time, both in and out of class, learning about the more elusive and “academic” aspects of writing. Memoir, in comparison to what they expected, seemed to them like a fluff assignment—not the kind of challenge they most likely were anticipating, dreading, or maybe some were hoping for. Maybe they thought that my course wasn’t the “real” writing course; maybe Composition 1 was just a survey course, a get-your-feet-wet with college writing course, and the one that really matters, where they will have to sit up and take notes, is Composition 2; or maybe, goodness forbid, their instructor was just an inexperienced GTA and didn’t know what she was doing. And, at least in the latter, they’d be partly right. Because there I was, in an old portable with mismatched desks and water stains on the ceiling, standing before my class of twenty-two students who were pretty sure I wasn’t entirely qualified to teach them, telling them about memoir, which I wasn’t entirely sure how to teach.

At the time I understood that I was required to teach memoir, but I didn’t understand *why* I was teaching memoir when there were, in my opinion, more important things to teach, like how

to research and write academic essays. But I kept this to myself. My job was to teach all four essays to the best of my ability. And that was what I set out to do.

I used John Trimbur's textbook, *The Call to Write*, to help shed light on the essay's significance and nuances. In his memoir chapter titled "Memoirs: Recalling Personal Experience," Trimbur explains, "The call to write memoirs comes in part from the desire people have to keep track of the past and to see how their lives have intersected with public events" (147). He continues a little further down the page saying, "By re-creating experiences from the past and exploring their significance, memoirists can begin to identify the continuities and discontinuities in their own lives [... as] both participant and observer [...] and interpret these unfolding events, giving them shape and meaning" (147). Not only are the student writers "characters" in their essays, or as Trimbur defines them, "participant[s]," they are also the only audience member whose voice is privileged to engage the subject in their memoirs. According to Trimbur, they are watching events unfold, and while composing, they are interacting with the subject matters they compose—not in a removed sense, but memoir's reflective writing requires that the analysis be active, intimate, and meaningful.

I didn't realize this at the time, but teaching memoir in composition gives students an "in" to enter their essays. So many of my students had been taught that their essays were for them to write, not for them to enter. What I mean is, students write their essays, but are told not to participate in them in any meaningful way other than writing the essay. They are encouraged to think critically and to use these thoughts, but to not emerge from behind the curtain, so to speak, and write from a place of first-hand experience or intimate knowing. In my teaching experience, this kind of philosophy often resulted in uninspired essays, because even though the

students were writing their essays, they did not feel they had the authority or permission to engage with their audience or content, and as a result, they wrote as if their essays belonged to someone else.

There are instructors like Wendy Bishop who have argued against teaching writing this way, who encourage teaching personal narratives in composition courses, to invite the writer back into the text. In her article “Suddenly Sexy: Creative Nonfiction Rear-Ends Composition,” Bishop explains why more traditional approaches to academic essays are taught in composition and why personal narratives are typically unwelcome. She writes about how composition has been whittled down over the years to its core purpose, which is to teach students how to write effective “school” and “research papers” (266). She further explains,

Exposition and argument were left to us [composition], not narration and description, which were ceded to creative writing. And much of our instructional effort was grounded in further subtractions as we lost or abandoned business writing, reporting, technical writing. Containment and teachability resulted in an eviscerated type of essay, not personal writing (too easy, too dangerous), not professional writing (too challenging), but school writing and research papers” (265-266).

And from what I understand about the teaching of writing, college curricula set the expectations and trends for high school writing curricula, and high school teachers follow these trends to prepare their students for writing at the community college/university level.

And maybe because teaching memoir in college composition seemed new to me—radical, even—I resisted in theory but knew I had to teach it in practice. This was the battle I

faced in deciding how to teach the students in my composition course. I was required by my program's curriculum to teach memoir, and I felt memoir was appropriate for teaching creative writing, but not appropriate for this class because I believed I needed to devote my students' attention to more pressing, and I believed relevant, essays like the traditionally academic ones.

Perhaps, it was how I was viewing memoir's connection to the field of creative writing, which I associated with "narration and description," not "school writing and research papers" which clouded my understanding of the significance of teaching the personal in composition (Bishop 265). I saw memoir as reflective and expressive, and I found it challenging to defend why it should be worth devoting some of the focus and energy typically allotted to the more traditional composition course staples, like the research paper and argument essays.

I knew what I had to do. I had to alter the assignment somehow. Make the memoir assignment more relevant, which in my mind meant making it about more than just memoir.

I was interested in visual rhetoric and came up with an idea pairing the hands-on making of visual rhetoric pieces as part of the invention process for the writing of their memoir. I shared this rough idea with Dr. Martha Marinara, our Composition Program's Director. She liked it and together we refined it and designed the assignment titled "The Visual Memoir Project." The assignment required the students to write a proposal for a piece of student-created visual art representing the moment they explore their memoir, then to create that piece of visual rhetoric, to write their memoir, and finally to write an analysis of the process and a reflection of their experience. That semester Dr. Marinara and I taught this assignment in our Composition 1 classes. It was a success.



Two students' visual memoirs come to mind. They both were freshmen. One student chose to write about her life-long struggle with learning how to cope with and cover for her mother's battle with alcoholism—I'll refer to her as Grace; the other student wrote about how he is not only the first person in his family to go to college, but he is also the only one of his circle of friends, too—I'll refer to him as Ryan.

All students were required to create their visual memoir art pieces first—the thinking behind this is that they could use their art to help them with their metaphorical language when they wrote their memoirs. Grace completely covered the outside of a wine bottle with words she had cut out from magazines that described how she felt as a child of an alcoholic mother. She then hung a simple black mask (like the ones people wear to masquerade parties) around the neck of the bottle. This mask represented the mask she wears every day to keep her feelings and her mother's addiction hidden from everyone, including her close friends. Her memoir was raw and rich with adjectives, details, and figurative language, which she borrowed from her art. Grace's memoir was poignant. As for Ryan, he poured plaster of Paris into two gloves—one a blue glove and one off-white. He formed the gloves into fists—the blue glove held a hammer and the off-white glove held a pencil and a rolled up diploma. Ryan grew up in a rural part of Central Florida and did really well in school—he used the “off-white” glove to represent himself with his “white-collar” aspirations to become a doctor and to work hard to help people and the “blue” glove to represent his “blue-collar” family and friends who took great pride in building things and working hard with their hands; they did not see much need for spending all that money to go off to a four-year university when a person could put in a hard day's work at a construction site and make a good living for themselves and their family. Ryan wanted to become a doctor—his

labor was school now—he felt misunderstood by his family and friends, because his choice to continue on with his education was not entirely supported. He used his visual art to show how similar they actually are, that they both use tools and their hands for making a living, it's just their tools are different rather than their desires for hard work or making a good living for themselves and their families. This translated into a thoughtful and highly aware memoir where he tried unifying their differences by pointing out their similarities in the way they used their hands.

Grace wrote about the challenges of hiding and how this affects who she is and how she interacts with those around her; Ryan explored the differences between white-collar jobs and blue-collar jobs, hard work and aspirations, and how he badly he wanted to be understood and accepted by those he loved and cared about who worked blue-collar jobs, and wondered if by going on with his education if he was going to lose a special connection he once had with family and friends. I believe these memoirs were successful because these students described their own experiences clearly and with abundant uses of descriptive and figurative languages, and they went beyond writing about their own situations and us to see themselves, their families, and their friends through a more critical lens and how the struggles they shared can teach us a little more about our humanity and who we are as a community, a society, and as people.

The reason I even proposed to teach proposal and analysis alongside memoir was because I didn't "get" memoir. I was like one of the instructors in the hall Laura heard saying, "I just don't understand why we have them write memoir." I wasn't sure how teaching this essay would help my students to feel more comfortable with the more "academic" kinds of writings they would be assigned in future coursework. But, proposals and analyses--these I understood. I felt

these would help prepare them to be successful writers in their majors—and memoir was a student-friendly way to get us there.

My students enjoyed the “hands on” memoir project. They created visual art and wrote memoirs about friendship, loneliness, abuse, perseverance, loss, and alcoholism, among other topics, too. They enjoyed the process; they were proud of what they had created and composed. They immersed themselves in their writing and revisions. They were interested in conveying the significance and story behind their experiences. They wanted to show off their visual rhetoric pieces, tell their stories better, and were eager to revise. Our class bonded, I enjoyed teaching them, and they were learning. They saw their writing improve. They were happy I was their teacher. In fact, the work the students did in our classes impressed Dr. Marinara and me so much that we proposed and eventually presented our project on a panel about teaching the personal in composition at a national conference. And it was this semester, my first semester teaching college composition, when I began to get a glimpse into the power and promise of teaching memoir in composition. I wondered if those instructors in the hall could see how excited and inspired my students became about their writing and wanting to improve their writing, would they see the power of memoir, too, and embrace the teaching of this essay in their composition courses?

### *Muddying the Waters of Memoir*

With competition ever increasing for freshmen admittance to four-year colleges and universities, many students who are enrolled in composition courses are proving to be relatively competent writers. Composition programs are designed to teach students how to consistently produce college-level text for a variety of calls to write. To meet this important task, memoir is

gaining a presence in composition to teach invention, voice, arrangement, and critical content through reflective writing, and is found in composition textbooks, as evidenced in *The Composition of Everyday Life* and *The Call to Write*.

But not everyone buys into memoir. Even composition instructors and scholars of composition who are wonderful instructors of writing and brilliant theorists, who understand the pedagogy and intentions of teaching the personal narrative in composition, do not believe memoir or the personal narrative should have a prominent place in composition theory and teaching practices. This complicates the task of deciding the kinds of writing in composition programs worth teaching, reading, writing (and writing about).

For many of these scholars, teaching memoir is considered sentimental in practice, ego-driven, self-centered, and not intellectual enough to be worth the time needed to teach this essay. Especially as composition scholars like Gary A. Olson in his article “The Death of Composition as an Intellectual Discipline” try to elevate the power and status of themselves, their scholarship, and the field of composition in English departments, it makes sense that these same scholars and teachers would also try to distance themselves from discourse typically associated with creative writing and the feminist, expressivist, marginalized voices and rhetoric of the ordinary and disenfranchised. Olson explains that as long the field of composition has existed, members of our field have been “struggling” with its definition and purpose. And, which I will discuss further in chapter 4, this is evident even among the three instructors from the same composition department, for they too differ in their goals for teaching writing, memoir, and personal narrative in their courses.

In Olson's essay, he claims that there are two groups of thought concerning the purposes of writing in composition. The first labors "to make it a social science, drawing heavily on developmental psychology and related fields" (30). The second insists "that composition should be a more humanistic discipline that draws on the work of 'creative' writers and on our own self-reflection about the writing process" (30). Olson wants "to define the field as one devoted not just to the teaching of writing but to all aspects of how discourse works turned to critical theory from a wide variety of disciplines, including anthropology, feminist theory, philosophy, and sociology," and believes there is validity in the second group's approach as long the first group is accepted as our field's primary form of discourse and study (30).

Olson surmises that composition is greater than understanding the teaching of writing, and thus requires more than the expressivist rhetoric used by some compositionists for bettering pedagogy and teaching practices. In order for composition to climb the ranks in English departments and for it to firmly establish itself and its courses as an intellectual field of study, Olson believes we must focus our teaching and our writing on exploring "how written discourse works" (23). Without inclusive theoretical practices that separate our field from others while creating new understandings about how discourse works, Olson predicts we will have very little scholarship to contribute to other disciplines, thus eventually making the intellectual aspects of our discipline obsolete. As a result, the field will exist for no other reason than for writing teachers concerned with the pedagogy and practices of teaching college composition, and to Olson, this would bring about the "death of composition as an intellectual discipline" (Olson 31). Within this frame, there seems to be little room for teaching memoir or the personal narrative in a meaningful way.

Some instructors do not teach the personal narrative because it isn't intellectual enough, and for some, even though they value the personal narrative, they are just tired of reading and assessing students' personal narratives. Patricia A. Sullivan addresses instructor burnout with the personal narrative in her essay "Composing Culture: A Place for the Personal." She writes, "we believe the personal essay locates students in a topic and form that is familiar to them, that they have a decided interest and stake in, that they can write about with a sense of authority" (43). This is the students' entrance into college writing and our hook to get them invested in to learning better writing practices. However, this doesn't always work out. There are students who are, what Sullivan calls, "reluctant narrators," who do not want to bare their souls and there are instructors who are "banishing the genre" all together from their courses because they are finished with teaching the emotive personal narrative (44-45). Then there are the students who write uncomfortably revealing essays about boyfriends/girlfriends, friendship, divorce, abortion, abuse, and the list goes on. Many instructors are through with reading and assessing these private essays. What they once believed was a trendy and fresh approach to teaching writing has now become awkward or boring and trite to them. Even though Sullivan stresses that we cannot assume that the personal is easily accessible to all students or that all instructors who have taught the personal narrative continue to reap its rewards and see its value, I think it's important to include that she still sees great promise in teaching the personal narrative.

Like Sullivan, some scholars don't see the personal as the death of composition as an intellectual field and find value in the personal narrative in composition; but like Olson, they concede that its overuse or misuse can hurt students' ability to compose essays at the college level. Sandra Stotsky is one of these scholars. She believes there is power in the personal, but too

much personal narrative or story-writing in composition teaching practices can ultimately disadvantage students in their future college writing situations even if in the moment of the personal narrative assignments they are more inspired to write.

In her essay, “The Uses and Limitations of Personal or Personalized Writing in Writing Theory, Research, and Instruction,” Stotsky explains that in many instances personal narratives “chiefly rely on the natural order of time as their organization principle,” and with overuse, “[s]uch an emphasis may leave [students] with little practice in learning how to locate information and ideas in external sources of knowledge, how to evaluate their quality and relevance, how to incorporate them with integrity, and how to integrate them coherently with their own reflections about the topic itself” (765). Regardless of how student-friendly personal narratives in teaching composition may seem, Stotsky warns that teachers who rely on them as course staples may be spending too much time on ego-centered writing rather than “idea-centered” writing and as a result can be under-preparing their students for research-based writing situations, which are “idea-centered” in nature (773). She believes that most students are well schooled in writing chronologically structured essays. Students have been assigned these kinds of story-like writing assignments since elementary school and are relying on their composition instructors to help them to become proficient at writing “idea-centered” essays. If instructors don’t focus enough on idea-centered and logically structured essays, then they are doing a disservice to their students and to the field of composition.

Although Joel Haefner also supports teaching the personal narrative in composition, unlike Stotsky, in his essay, “Democracy, Pedagogy, and the Personal,” he takes issue not with how often it is taught but with how overly simplistic some instructors view it and teach it as a

way for students to find their authentic voices. He believes some instructors make elitist and naïve assumptions when they view the personal this way. The personal narrative, according to Haefner, is not a simplistic essay to which any writer or reader has easy access. He suggests that the personal essay is flawed in that the writer is not “a complete self confront[ing] a solid world” and thus cannot perceive the world with accuracy. If the student writers cannot perceive the world with accuracy, then they cannot “gain access to their ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ voice and perspective.” He suggests a way to solve this problem is by teaching the personal through collaborative writing, so the “I” becomes “we.” Through this pedagogical approach to teaching the personal, Haefner posits that an epistemic balance can be struck between the limited “I” and the collective, collaborative “we,” and thus he teaches the personal as a social way to seek knowledge in a more democratic, more meaningful context.

These instructors and scholars are brilliant, and they muddy the waters of teaching memoir as intellectual work. They muddy the waters because they see the power of the personal narrative, but they also see its limitations. Many view memoir as a way to get students writing but question its ability to prepare them for the more “challenging” essays ahead. Edward M. White explains in his article, “Writing for Nobody,” that “teaching and learning how to write are so demanding, so intellectually, emotionally, physically exhausting if done honestly, that everyone should expect cheap and easy substitutes to flood the market” (167). And perhaps from a certain angle, this is how teaching memoir in composition can come across. It is an easy way to draw students into the course, a good icebreaker to get everyone comfortable and invested in their first writing assignment. And I’m not saying that this is entirely a bad thing. But when this is the main reason memoir is taught, memoir can immediately lose much of its value in the



course as a *teaching* essay. When instructors see memoir as a confidence-building essay, memoir assumes the role of an ancillary assignment when in fact it doesn't have to be.

### *In Defense of Teaching Memoir*

Writing meaningful text is what students aim to do, but it can be a daunting goal, especially for first-year students. Just navigating the language, style, and arrangement of academic essays can be challenging enough. James Berlin explains in *Rhetoric and Reality*, that “[a]s beginning students encounter an overwhelming array of new ideas and ways of thinking, the rhetorical training they bring with them inevitably proves—regardless of the their intelligence or training—unequal to the task of dealing with their new intellectual experience” (3). Learning how to think and write differently is a major undertaking. Perhaps the intelligent design of teaching memoir in composition is that it begins the course by requiring the intellectual work of examining the familiar—themselves.

Teaching memoir provides the students with an assignment designed around them. They are the subjects, which is timely, because the first formal assignment is likely to be the one where they are most intimidated with the prospects of writing for someone new and for being graded by a college-level instructor. If they are to write about themselves, then at least they know their subject matter, and anxiety about whether they know more about their subject to contribute anything that their instructor would value seems to subside a bit and (we hope) their energy for focusing on writing will increase. The style of memoir can also draw students into the essay. They are familiar with storytelling's chronological structure, which differs from academic's logically structured arrangements. This can bring to the essay a familiar, warm feeling to writing the essay even if the students never had experience formally writing memoir.

In Philip Lopate's article "Curiouser and Curiouser: The Practice of Nonfiction Today," Lopate claims that it's not their familiarity with the structure of creative writing genres that draws them to writing this genre; the main reason students are drawn specifically to writing creative nonfiction is that they "experience their own reality with more confidence than an imagined one" (4). They are intimate with their subject and are the authority of it, too. They don't have to imagine or create the subject into being, because everything, subject and story, is immediately available to them. They have to create the characters on paper, but they don't have to invent the characters or their stories' arcs, because they already exist in their memories.

Having the confidence to be able to write is important, and is easier for students to be confident in their writing when writing about something that matters to them and is something that they know and care about. This is true for many writers. Memoir begins the students writing in this place because it does not require the students to assume a voice of authority about a subject they just learned existed a few weeks prior like they would need to do for some research papers, but it does require the examination of the past self and the past self's experiences as intimate sources of information, or data if you will, to examine, value, and (hopefully) arrive at new understandings. This kind of reflective and exploratory writing, though not unfamiliar to them, can be thoughtful and challenging.

Writing in first person is powerful, too; it declares ownership of one's voice and can assume presence and authority. The "I" used in memoir positions the writers within their essays, or what Marianna De Marco Torgovnick calls "crossover-writing" (282). In her book titled *Crossing Ocean Parkway: Readings by an Italian American Daughter*, Torgovnick explains how memoir allows writers to enter, or "crossover" into their essays, and at the same time broaden the

content and provide their audience with a better understanding of who the writers are and how their perspectives and experiences intersect with their subjects. Their writing also becomes socially bound and more common, as David Bleich and Deborah H. Holdstein explain in “Recognizing the Human in Humanities.” Bleich and Holdstein write,

[I]t is no longer personal to be personal—it is fundamental. Once I include myself in the ‘audience’ my contribution changes: my words lose their hortatory status, and take on instead the role of invitation, contribution, membership, and studenthood. I am no longer bound to argue, to make points and cases, or to think that whoever reads my work must be persuaded. I am, rather, more conscious of being among others with comparable, though not identical, interests. (12)

This approach differs from the combative style of writing exhibited in Gary Olson’s “The Death of Composition as an Intellectual Discipline,” where Olson engages a handful of compositionists, mainly Wendy Bishop. But in personal narratives, the writers do more than just engage and discuss the subject, they emerge from behind the curtain via the personal to make observations and connections that would be omitted by writers in an author-absent style of prose. Why does this matter? Why is being present in writing significant to teaching composition students?

For one reason, many first-year composition students do not see themselves as writers. These students only write for classes for no other reason than because they have to. In the book *Writing Ourselves Into the Story: Unheard Voices From Composition Studies* is the article “Student Voices: How Students Define Themselves as Writers” by Carol Lea Clark and Students of English 1803. In Clark’s article, she recounts asking her students a fairly simple question, “Are you writers?” She got a fairly unified response: “No.” Then she asks them, “What is a

writer?" One student replies, "I think of famous names like novelists such as Ernest Hemingway or Jack London." Another student defines a writer as "a newspaper columnist or a novelist, not someone who writes as part of school work" (217). And why would they see themselves as writers, especially if a person must be a celebrated author or columnist to be considered by their readers to be accepted as writers? It seems that what makes one a writer, according to these students, are people who are considered good at the craft and have something to share of interest to their readers. I imagine most of these students' experiences with being "writers" are writing for an audience of one, who celebrates their "good word choice" by writing interjections in the margins and points out their mistakes by writing directly over their words. And, I imagine that most students have been advised many times to compose themselves out of their writing, especially when writing the essays deemed most academic in style and important.

Teaching memoir in composition teaches students that even in high-stakes essays, it is okay to write themselves back into inventing their arguments and their essays, too, if they so choose. Memoir invites students to find a place for themselves in their texts, to examine what they know, and determine the value of this knowledge, who they are in relationship to this knowledge, and how it was learned. It requires them to examine why they believe what they do, and it asks the important question of "So what?" and requires them to give their audience a meaningful answer. It has the ability to empower them to use their own stories in their own voice and make room for us, their instructor, all at the same time while writing their essays. As Lad Tobin explains in "Process Pedagogy," it is up to us, their instructors,

to get out of their way, give them the freedom to choose their own material, and show them that we are interested [...]. It is not so much a matter of teaching

students new rules or strategies but of helping them gain access to their ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ voice and perspective that traditional school has taught them to distrust and suppress. (5)

Memoir provides students the space and the opportunity for our students to be authoritative in their authentic voice, embodying their rhetoric, and writing about something that matters to them. Tobin says, we must “show them that we are interested” in what they have to share. I believe it is important that students feel that someone who matters is reading their writing with interest. I see memoir providing this in a couple ways: 1) reader as audience in a traditional sense; 2) writer as audience, too. “Reader as audience” is rather self-explanatory. However, what I mean when I write “writer as audience” is that the writer feels they matter and is fully aware of the writing process; s/he is not only writing the memoir, but s/he also is engaging with the writing as “both participant and observer” (Trimbur 147). So often in my teaching experience my students would write without really participating in the writing, which resulted in vapid pieces. I see memoir as way to push writers into their writing because they must be present and engaged in the subject matter for the essay to have any chance at being effective. Besides, as one of the instructors I interviewed suggests, many students in composition courses are still teens, and many teens are still trying to figure out themselves, and the memoir essay kind of panders to this and their desire to understand themselves better and to be better understood.

And memoir requires the writer to employ many of the techniques used when writing creative fiction, a genre that many students enjoy writing, to writing creative nonfiction.

Returning to Lopate’s article, he cites Lee Gutkind who discusses creative nonfiction in an interview with Donna Seaman. Gutkind explains, “Creative nonfiction allows the nonfiction

writer to use literary techniques usually used only by fiction writers, such as scene-setting, description, dialogue, action, suspense, plot. All those things that make terrific short stories in the most cinematic and dramatic way possible. That's creative nonfiction" (5). Based on this description, having creative nonfiction in a first-year composition course does not seemingly fit in with moving students toward writing solid argument papers. However, perhaps it makes more sense if we look at how the forms and techniques of these genres overlap.

In order to write an argument paper, students have to introduce the subject and the mood/tone of the essay, and where the problem takes place (establishing a scene), describe the problem and its significance so that the readers understand the issue(s) (description), explore the issue(s) and use sources to further strengthen the positions (engage in a dialog, cite experts and discuss research), make the arguments meaningful to the audience by revealing what's at stake (creating action/suspense), and of course, there has to be an overall sense of structure (plot). Add style and awareness of subject and audience to this list and I believe looking at creative nonfiction through this lens reveals how teaching memoir could help our students to become better writers of more traditionally assigned college essays.

In Peter Elbow's text *Everyone Can Write: Essays Toward a Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching Writing*, Elbow makes a similar case as the instructors I interviewed did for teaching the personal narrative in composition:

Reason 1: Students are in college for a handful of years, so it's important that they be prepared for the variety of future writing situations they will encounter. He believes that "the best test of a writing course is whether it makes students more likely to use writing in their lives [...], but if we teach only academic discourse we will surely fail at this most important goal of

helping students use writing by choice in their lives” (236). Most non-English majors will take Composition 1 and Composition 2 and never take another writing course again for the rest of their lives. For these students in particular, Elbow considers it important that they be exposed to more genres than just arguments and research papers geared toward an academic audience.

Reason 2: Students need to learn how to “render experience” in writing rather than just to explain and inform experience in writing. Elbow believes that “[w]hen students leave the university unable to find words to render their experience, they are radically impoverished” (237). If students do not know how to effectively illustrate their own experiences in detail, then when a time comes where they need to or want to retell or reflect upon something in writing but they don’t have the skills, then how literate in their everyday lives are they, really?

Reason 3: Elbow writes, “We need nonacademic discourse *even* for the sake of helping students produce good academic discourse” (237). He explains that there are students who are trained in academic discourse who can restate or explain a principle, “but cannot simply tell a story of what is going on in the room or country around them on account of that principle—or what the room or country would look like if that principle were different” (237). He suggests that when students can explain something and convey its significance in common English rather than in field-specific discourse, then that’s when we can be certain that they truly understand what they know and we are teaching them.

Returning to Patricia A. Sullivan’s article “Composing Culture: A Place for the Personal,” Sullivan believes that in teaching personal narratives we will prepare our students for learning to write the more traditionally assigned college essays. She explains in her essay that for a writer to write with confidence, they must imagine they have an invested and interested reader

to write to. Without this, she wonders, what is the point to writing? As their instructor, she assumes the role of the invested reader and must be in a position of valuing her students as writers and their ability to share knowledge. Sullivan explains, “Providing the conditions for our students to speak surely entails that we become engaged readers and interlocutors of our students’ writing,” and to do this well, she insists that we become “scholars of the ordinary” (54). We must prize what they know. After all, our students are far from being scholars in their chosen field; in fact, many haven’t even chosen a major—but even in this place of academic uncertainty, they can be astute and seasoned “scholars of the ordinary” (54). Memoir seems like an ideal genre choice. We are teaching our students how to locate knowledge, how to think about it, and how to arrange and present it so that their writings are meaningful to their audience. Since we are teaching the next generation of thinkers, educators, businessmen and businesswomen, leaders and scholars, we must believe our students are makers of “the kind of knowledge worth having” (45). If we believe in them and believe that they have knowledge worth sharing, then the next logical step is for many of them to begin to believe it themselves.

I realize that this is extremely idealistic. In the classroom, instructors only have a short amount of time they can devote to teaching writing that they believe matters. With so much emphasis on school writing and preparing students to write effective, research-based essays at the college level, how does Sullivan’s “I believe in you!” teaching of memoir fit in to this?

In Candace Spigelman’s “Argument and Evidence in the Case of the Personal”, she states that “personal writing [...] should not be self-disclosive; neither should its end be emotive and self-serving” (71), and argues that “the telling of stories can actually serve the *same* purposes as academic writing and that narratives of the personal experience can accomplish serious scholarly



work” (64). The personal can also be an “ethos-building strategy, where the narrator establishes his or her credibility” (67), which is helpful for students wanting to prove that they understand and thus have the authority to “enter the academic conversation by bringing [what they know,] their own ‘extratextual knowledge’ and the authority of their own voices to the texts they read” (71). Contrary to what some instructors experience when teaching memoir and personal narrative, there is no need for students to feel the need to write emotively about personal or private experiences for their memoirs to be effective. In fact, this might not be the best way to approach teaching the personal. Teaching the students how to use an experience to arrive at a new understanding of a specific topic, without allowing students to write about subjects that are “too personal,” challenges the students to find the extraordinary in everyday experiences to participate and contribute to intellectual discussions, making entering academic discussions more accessible to them and potentially meaningful to their audience.

Since the kind of writing composition students typically dread (and perhaps respect more) are the kind that requires them, as explained in David Bartholomae’s “Inventing the University”, to “learn to speak” the language of the university, and they “must dare to speak it or carry off the bluff, since speaking and writing will most certainly be required long before the skill is ‘learned’” (624). Before students are able to form their thoughts comfortably in a recognizable, but unfamiliar discourse, they are required to research topics they know little about, adopt positions, and defend them vigorously with the zeal and skill expected of them by their instructors, and all in “the language of the university” they have yet to own with confidence (Bartholomae 624).

Perhaps beginning with the examination of moments in their lives is an ideal place to start. Since audiences in higher education tend to value “traditional forms of evidence-making” above all others, it has the effect of stifling the voices of those “viewed as outside mainstream Western culture” (Spigelman 66). By providing a space for all students in the curriculum, regardless of background or skill level, to write about what they know in a familiar genre, they might feel more secure writing to share what they’ve learned with their instructors when they are most unsure they have any insight worthy to offer. Especially when there are so many writing lessons to teach and revisions of drafts to be (re)assigned, perhaps the memoir is the sanest pedagogical choice for students to begin their journey exploring the composition of academic essays in academic discourse(s).

The fact that most students in Clark’s class, and perhaps in many other instructors’ classes, too, do not see themselves as writers and believe that they do not write well is a problem. If we want to teach our students to become better writers, then it will help if they see themselves as writers first. Memoir gives these students the opportunity to tell their stories, to be the authority of their texts, and to offer insights they have discovered in the process of composing their pieces. If we don’t inspire students to participate, engage in, and own their writing, then we are at risk of becoming nothing more than just a cog in a postsecondary institutional machine that teaches students the skills required to produce more cleanly written text. This sounds like lifeless composition to me and something not worth writing much about.

## CHAPTER 3

### *Introduction to The Memoir Assignment*

UCF was a smaller university during the time I conducted this study in 2005. At the time of data collection, UCF's Composition Program taught thousands of undergraduate students each semester. According to UCF's admission website, 7,636 freshmen students were enrolled at UCF during the 2003-2004 semesters. The following is a quick snapshot of these students' academic statistics enrolled at UCF: Students averaged a 3.68 grade point average in high school, and based on the previous scoring system of the SAT, scored average SAT scores of 592 in critical reading, 609 in math, totaling 1201.

Although memoir is no longer mandated by UCF's Composition Program's curriculum, during the time I gathered data for this thesis, memoir was taught in all Composition 1's courses in UCF's Composition Program. Composition 1 is the first of two courses within the program designed to hone the skills undergraduate students need to compose effectively at the university for a variety of calls to write. Since the program placed importance on memoir and the personal in composition, this put memoir in a particularly interesting position for studying. UCF's Composition Program is also a particularly interesting case because all of its composition instructors, in spite of their stances on memoir, were required to teach memoir in their Composition 1 classes. This meant that regardless of the instructors' beliefs about memoir—from positive to negative and everywhere in between—they were all teaching memoir to their students.

Below is the UCF Composition Program's official memoir assignment used during the time I collected data for this study:

Learning objectives for this assignment include the ability to:

- Identify a specific audience
- Write in a personal voice
- Select and order events into a narrative
- Construct and convey the meaning of a clearly significant moment in your life

**Assignment** Write an essay in a personal voice that recreates a particular experience.

Incorporate narrative techniques and sensory detail as well as dialogue, characterization, thought passages, and flashbacks.

The assignment's objectives create a simple frame for teaching memoir based on audience, voice, narrative, and meaning. The purpose behind this simplicity allows instructors significant room to create a memoir assignment that meets both the program's and their classes' objectives. This freedom is well intentioned and can be especially effective for teachers who embrace memoir and/or for those who know how to implement it effectively in their Composition 1 classes. And this is where professional development comes in.

However, if instructors do not value memoir and/or do not see how it fits into the course's curriculum, I can see how the simplicity and openness of the assignment's parameters could simplify memoir and potentially reduce it to an icebreaker, "get-to-know-you" kind of writing exercise. Without instructors initiating the leap from teaching memoir as a simple exercise that meets the above assignment criteria to memoir as a powerful and critical analysis essay, the objectives' openness can easily lend themselves to students earning "easy A's" in some instructors' classes on relatively uncritical essays to hard-earned "A's" in other instructors' classes on critical ones—it's all in how the instructors view and teach memoir.

Regardless of how one views memoir, the rubric helps to maintain a certain level of writing on par with the other three core essays. The following is a description of UCF's Composition Program's official memoir essay grading rubric used during the time I collected data for this study:

According to the memoir's rubric, the students must be mindful of four criteria: "Content/Organization," "Diction," "Sentence Structure," and "Grammar/Conventions." These four criteria are the same for the other core essays, except in the other three there is a research component as well. This is how an outstanding memoir would be described: In "Content and Organization," it would have a "[w]ell-defined topic; clear significance; insightful development of ideas through narrative techniques; consistent focus and graceful transitions." As for its "Diction," it would have "[c]ompelling word choice, demonstrating insightful use of figurative language." Regarding "Sentence structure," "[s]entences are carefully formed and positioned with attention to emphasis, rhythm and pace to engage the reader." And as for "Grammar and Mechanics," it "[d]emonstrates mastery of grammar, creating compelling prose; few to no errors."

My study's aim is not to analyze how the assignment and the rubric are received by the instructors and implemented in their classes, even though I believe this could prove to be an interesting study; rather, I am interested in learning how instructors in a large composition program are interpreting memoir in their teachings and what value they believe it brings to their classes. This becomes especially interesting when the assignment and core objectives and rubric are so open and simply written, leaving ample room for instructors' creativity and individual interpretations.

### *Method*

To explore the promises and problems in the implementation of memoir, I have interviewed three (3) UCF composition instructors who value teaching memoir in their Composition 1 classes. I chose instructors who were interested in memoir because that is what interested me.

I selected these three instructors because they have invested time in developing their memoir assignments and have well-established pedagogies and methodologies for teaching memoir and composition. Since I wish for the instructors' identities to remain anonymous, I have provided each instructor with a pseudonym. The instructors will be introduced and discussed as: Jim, Laura, and Mike.

Jim has been a composition instructor at UCF for more than 5 years. He believes that Composition 1 and Composition 2 are important courses because they might be the only writing courses his students will have during their entire college career. He embraces the creative writing element in memoir and encourages his students to take risks in writing the memoir essay. The memoir is the first essay his students write.

Laura has been a composition instructor at UCF for more than 5 years. She loves teaching writing and embraces memoir. She believes that memoir is the most challenging essay of the four core essays in her Composition 1 classes. For this reason she sometimes teaches memoir last.

Mike has been a composition instructor at UCF for more than 5 years. He takes his composition course seriously and believes that memoir is important because it helps him to teach voice, the value of experiences, audience awareness, and revision, which all go toward preparing

his students for the more “academic” essays he will teach later in the course. He teaches memoir first.

I have transcribed each of the interviews and summarized the information pertinent to this study. These summaries have become the case studies I have used to examine how these instructors value and interpret memoir and its objectives. I used these case studies to explore the following four research questions:

### *Research Questions*

- **Why do these instructors teach memoir?**

The official memoir assignment and objectives define and present memoir as a personal narrative written in a personal voice, intended for a particular audience, and constructs and conveys the meaning of a personal event. This curricular outline becomes the pedagogical map all instructors must follow. From this map, instructors must guide their students down the pathways toward writing their memoir essay. Based upon preliminary discussions with instructors, instructors’ routes to memoir vary: Some take shortcuts, some trek down roads they have forged themselves, and others follow a more well-trodden path. Each pathway to memoir exposes students to different learning experiences.

With this said, I know that each of them has to teach memoir, but what I am interested in learning is why they teach this essay. Are their reasons similar? If they are, what is this “big” reason to teach memoir? If their reasons are different, why, and what are they? What can we learn about the ways standard assignments can vary, even among instructors trying to adhere to the spirit of the assignment? And how are instructors adapting the memoir assignment according to their beliefs, experiences, and teaching practices?

- **What can this tell us about memoir and the personal in composition?**

Before I can answer these questions, I want to understand why they teach this essay. The question is simple enough. I hope that through understanding their whys I can better analyze and understand their pedagogical choices.

**What are the instructors' approaches to memoir?**

Each instructor has his or her own approaches to teaching memoir, and I knew something about this before I interviewed them. One of the reasons I chose them, though, is because they approached memoir differently. What I want to know is:

What are their reasons behind their pedagogical choices for teaching memoir the way they do? How does the answer to why they teach memoir inform how they teach this essay? What can we glean from this? How does this help us to better understand the place and purpose of the personal narrative in composition?

I am also interested in learning if their approaches are similar. If they are similar, then what other ways are they similar? What can these similarities reveal about composition pedagogy and the teaching of memoir? If their approaches are different, then how are they different? Do these differences stem from why they teach memoir? What can these differences reveal about composition pedagogy and the teaching of memoir?

Exploring these questions could reveal how dynamic the memoir assignment can be and the ways this mandated assignment varies from instructor to instructor.

- **What value do these instructors see in memoir?**

This question is important because I remember hearing from time to time instructors asking, "Why are we teaching memoir?" At one point, I was even asking this question myself.



However, I have never heard instructors ask the same question regarding the commentary, review, or argument essays. Memoir stood out to these instructors as an essay that didn't belong, and it seemed to be getting attention and time that they believed it didn't deserve. For all those who begrudgingly taught memoir and did not or could not grasp the substantial value memoir brought to their courses, I want to firm my understanding of the values of memoir in composition through studying instructors who gladly taught memoir and found value in its teachings.

- **What does it mean to these instructors if their students can write good memoirs?**

Lastly, I want to understand why it matters. Why does it matter to these instructors if their students can write a good memoir? Would the answers to this question reveal the legitimate concern behind the instructors who question memoir's place in the teaching of composition? I think it is easy to talk pedagogy and theory, but in a classroom, what really matters in the end is how students benefit from what they are learning. I am curious to learn what these instructors believe their students gain from learning to write memoir.

### *Possible Contributions*

I want to better understand memoir and what we may need to do to help memoir realize its promise in composition programs and curricula. Through this study we can learn more about how instructors are using memoir in their classes, and we also can learn about implementing and supporting core curricular objectives and assignments in a large program.

Even though this study is framed within UCF's Composition Program, the implications could be farther reaching. UCF's instructors' perceptions and attitudes toward memoir could be indicative of instructors' perceptions and attitudes toward memoir at other institutions. The

following are possible contributions this study could provide to UCF and other colleges and universities:

- This study's findings can help us to better understand how UCF instructors are interpreting memoir in a large composition program.
- This study's findings can show us how UCF instructors are teaching the curriculum and how they adjust the assignment to fit their beliefs and practices, and what they are doing to meet their students' needs.
- Since the assignment has a simple frame, this study offers insight into ways the memoir assignment and objectives can be modified so that it can complement each of the instructor's pedagogical practices.

Every instructor who teaches this course has to find a way to connect with and then teach this controversial genre. The instructors I have interviewed make real attempts to teach memoir to the best of their abilities. In their attempts to teach memoir well, they are teaching memoir differently. Studying these differences could provide valuable research and documentation on memoir in a composition program, how instructors are modifying curriculum, and the ways memoir's promises and problems can guide us toward developing a more cohesive composition curriculum of the personal.

## CHAPTER 4

### *Introduction*

To explore the promises and problems in the implementation of memoir, I have interviewed three UCF composition instructors who teach memoir in their Composition 1 classes. I chose these UCF composition instructors because they value memoir in their Composition 1 classes.

These three instructors have invested time in developing their memoir assignments and have well-established pedagogies and methodologies. Since I wish for the instructors' identities to remain anonymous, I have provided each instructor with his or her own pseudonym. In this chapter, I will refer to the instructors as Jim, Laura, and Mike.

### *Jim*

Jim comes across in my interview as an easygoing kind of instructor. He calls memoir his “anti-freak out essay,” which he defines as “a gentle introduction into the world of college composition.” Most of the students in Jim’s composition classes are freshman with minimal, if any, college writing experiences. He believes it is his job to present them with progressively challenging writing situations in a safe environment. He views memoir as a practical essay in the teaching of writing because it eases his students into his course and into more complex writing situations. Since he uses collaborative learning, peer revision, and writing workshops to share and improve students’ essays, he claims the audience (just their classmates and himself) are mostly hipper and more forgiving than an academic audience, like an “uptight professor” might be; this results in his students feeling they have more freedom to explore writing by taking risks and trying new things and ideas out.

Jim views memoir as an easier assignment than the commentary, review, and argument essays. In memoir, students get to write about themselves, which is a subject they know intimately well and don't have to research. All Jim requires his students to do to prepare for and to write their memoir essay is: read a chapter in John Tribur's *The Call to Write* textbook about memoir (included in the chapter are four examples of short memoirs: Gary Soto's "Black Hair," Annie Dillard's "Throwing Snowballs," Tariq Ali's "An Atheist Child," and an excerpt from one of Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor* comic books), write a couple drafts, bring in pieces and workshop their essays with him and their classmates, and then put these pieces together. In Jim's words, "Voila—there's their memoir essay."

It is clear that Jim embraces memoir and enjoys teaching this essay, but he he, too, is unsure as to why it was initially put into the curriculum; perhaps, he shared with me, this is why his students are unsure about why they are learning it as well. Whether Jim's sure as to why it was initially put into UCF's Composition Program's curriculum or not, I believe he's found a meaningful place for memoir in his course's curriculum and he is witness to the ways teaching memoir can benefit his students. After all, Jim believes that if he begins his course with argument, as some composition instructors encourage and do, he might overwhelm and alienate his students at a critical point in the semester; as a result, their thoughts, confidence, and good writing might get suppressed or lost for a while before the students feel more comfortable with him and ease back into feeling more confident in their abilities to write well.

His motivation for teaching memoir before the other essays is so he can engage his students with an essay about them in a genre that feels more comfortable and closer to home;

then he has them write a commentary and a review, which slowly takes them out of their comfort zones and finally leads them to the doorstep of the academic essay.

According to Gian Pagnucci in *Living the Narrative Life*, this philosophy of beginning a course with a personal narrative essay and working toward the more argumentative essays is a common practice among instructors, like Jim, who teach personal narrative in their composition courses. Pagnucci writes,

We can see this in the common practice to start introductory composition courses by having students write a personal essay and then move on to the more ‘difficult’ and ‘important’ research paper. (43)

Jim sees the purpose behind his course’s structure, namely beginning with memoir and ending with an argumentative research paper, and describes how it functions as the first essay in course, that memoir serves as a “gradual assimilation into our discourse community, rather than [starting the course with an argument essay and] saying, ‘There’s the pool, there you go, try to swim.’” He also believes that there is great value in his students learning how to effectively use dialog, description, and figurative language first, because they could use these techniques to push the envelopes of convention in the other three genres they will write in his class [commentary, review, and argument] to enliven the essays which some might deem are prone to stale writing.

Teaching memoir as the first of four essays also gives his students a chance to write a heavily-weighted essay that he believes they don’t take all that seriously; both the style and subject matter are reminiscent of the reflective writing pieces many have done in high school, which disarms them a bit, so they are not “freaking out” initially, “which is my purpose,” he reiterates. He says this strategy works for him because he doesn’t get a lot of resistance from the

students. He has a tougher time selling argument and explaining to them that they need to learn it in his class because it's going to prepare them for future writing situations. Jim appreciates how, by teaching the memoir essay, he can expose his students to an essay and style of writing within the creative writing genre that they may not have realized existed before, and he likes how teaching memoir first allows his class to write more informally then gradually move into more academically formal pieces of writing that require research and citations, like commentary and argument. When he has them study and practice more traditional college essays, he says this is where they believe the writing assignments become “boring”—boring because they have to think about subjects beyond themselves and perhaps outside of their areas of interest.

However, memoir is unique in that it requires them to focus on themselves and this, Jim believes, helps to entice his students into buying into his composition course. Anne Ruggles Gere in her essay “Revealing Silences: Rethinking Personal Writing,” writes about the enticing nature of memoir as the seductive nature of writing personal narratives. She believes that we, like our students, are attracted to personal narratives and are seduced into writing revelations about our own lives (210). There is a great deal of “seduction” in writing reflective essays about oneself, and according to Jim, his students usually say memoir was their favorite to write in his class, but on the flipside, they also viewed memoir as the least challenging of the essays they were assigned, too. He hopes that every student in his class understands why they are writing memoir, but he doesn't feel that many do, although he does believe his students see how the narrative tools they learn through memoir could help them to make their future essays more interesting and personal. Ultimately, he hopes they find the voice and narrative techniques they hone in memoir useful in other classes, communities, and genres of writing and discourse. It seems like

his purpose behind the teaching of memoir might be lost on many of his students—but he said that they don't necessarily need to understand the pedagogical rhyme or reason behind its place in the curriculum—what's important is that they benefit from its teachings.

Jim explains that some of them have preconceived ideas about what college writing is and they are usually surprised that the first essay they write in his class is about themselves. He noted that many of his students are under the impression that when writing a serious paper for school, they believe they must write themselves out of their writing; they also believe that good writing, sophisticated-sounding, academic writing, must be impersonal and use “highfalutin,” esoteric language so that the target audience can barely understand it anymore.

Many of Jim's students are also shocked to learn that they can use “I” in an argument, especially at the college level. He says to his students that when writing an argument, there may be a need to address the reader in first person; he offers the example: ““Hey, I am a student at UCF, and I am affected personally by the parking issues here,”” and then he suggests to the students to present their personal narratives in such a way as to create or strengthen the pathos in their arguments. And they know what he means and likely will be more adept at writing their personal experiences because of their experiences with writing memoir. For this reason, Jim sees the memoir, in his words, “as a machine doing a job” that performs better than any of the three essays (commentary, review, and argument) would as the first essay in his composition course. Rather than beginning with social commentary, review, or argument, Jim has his students begin with writing an essay that is reminiscent of narrative fiction and embodies many of the traits found in storytelling. Most of his students are familiar with narrative fiction, but as Jim sees it, they understand that this “narrative fiction” is about them, and it's real, so it's nonfiction that

uses the tools of fiction writing, like scene, description, and dialog to make a connection between them and their audience, and once more, it's about them.

In harnessing the power of writing about the self, Jim locks on to a point that Philip Lopate makes in his article, "Curiouser and Curiouser: The Practice of Nonfiction Today," about why students are drawn to writing narrative nonfictions. Lopate explains that students are drawn to writing narrative nonfiction not just because they are familiar with this storytelling genre, but because they are writing about themselves and they "experience their own reality with more confidence than an imagined one" (4). They are writing from a perspective of clarity and with experience in and belief in their control over the knowledge of the topics they are exploring. The fact that the tools they use to share their knowledge are similar to the ones they are familiar with from reading narrative fictions may only add to their comfort and ease in performing this genre of writing.

However, this is not true with all of Jim's students. Some of Jim's students have been taught that a prescriptive approach is the key to writing effective essays, so their writing is very structured and obvious. For example, their introductory paragraph is four sentences long, and within those sentences they outline their three ideas; this is followed by a fifth sentence, which is their thesis statement. The first idea is then discussed in the second paragraph; the second idea is discussed in the third paragraph, and so forth. These students in particular find memoir challenging to write because it is not so easily packaged into a prescribed structure, and are they are also intimidated by the freedom Jim gives them in writing memoir. He says these students would rather be told, "Please write me five paragraphs; this is exactly what I want you to write; this is exactly how to do it; this is exactly what to say." The memoir helps to set a precedent that



not all essays need nor should be tethered to a one-size-fits-all structure—he believes this experience helps them to loosen their grips a little on the limiting nature of the five-paragraph essay and encourages them to let their thoughts and content rather than the structure dictate the invention process, design, and drafting of their essays.

He believes memoir “embodies, embraces, and supports [his] philosophy of risk taking. And students feel a little more empowered when they can write about themselves.” Giving students the freedom to write about themselves and take the risks they want to take in their writing can be liberating for some, and it is a philosophy also shared by Lad Tobin. In his article, “Process Pedagogy,” Tobin explains that as instructors of our writing students, we can tend to get too involved in our students writing. His approach to teaching writing is:

to get out of their [the students’] way, give them the freedom to choose their own material, and show them that we are interested [...]. It is not so much a matter of teaching students new rules or strategies but of helping them gain access to their ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ voice and perspective that traditional school has taught them to distrust and suppress. (5)

Gaining access to their own voice and to trust that they have something of value to share with the reader is an important lesson Jim teaches in his class. He wants them to know that they have agency to write; he does this by providing them with the space to write and the freedom to take risks in their writing.

Jim was an interesting instructor to interview because he would say something that would validate the very presence of memoir in his course and how it gives the students a place to share themselves and trust in their voice, and then he would follow it with something like this: “Also,

because [memoir's] about the writer, it allows the students to break the ice with each other; they get to know each other a little bit better; I get to know them a little bit better, so it serves as an icebreaker.”

During the interview and after transcribing it, I thought Jim offered some interesting insights in how he used memoir, but it bothered me that he referred to memoir a few times as a good “icebreaker” essay. Over time I have come to believe that memoir is a powerful essay, and I found it somewhat belittling to identify this beautiful genre as an “icebreaker” essay, which seemed to place it in the same category as relatively insignificant, “get-to-know-you” first writing class assignments.

In “The Social Construction of Expressivist Pedagogy,” Karen Surman Paley writes about this strange relationship between English Departments and the teaching of narrative in composition classes. She quotes Thomas Newkirk, from his book *The Performance of Self in Student Writing*, who writes, “On one hand, [English Departments] are built upon the narrative—it should come as no news that students become English majors to get academic credit for reading narrative fiction. Yet in [composition] there is a sense that narratives are relatively easy to write and academically suspect” (20). As such, when viewed through this lens, they are perceived as good “icebreaker” essays and often taught as the first essay in composition classes. Even though Jim prizes narrative fiction, he describes the teaching of narrative nonfiction in composition as an “icebreaker” exercise in writing. And this is one of ways Jim sees memoir in his course.

However, when Jim uses the term “icebreaker” to describe a purpose of the essay, I believe he sees it as serving multiple roles—one of them being, because of its personal nature, to

serve as a way to ease students into the course by writing about what they know; another being, the students to get to know one another a little bit through working through and writing their narrative nonfictions. But Jim runs his class as a series of four writing workshops with instructor-led mini-lessons peppered throughout the course. The reason he believes an “icebreaker” essay is necessary is because he not only needs his class to feel disarmed and begin to trust themselves as writers, but they also need to get to know and trust the other students in their class. They need to develop a rapport with one another and establish the beginnings of a writing community in his class in the first weeks of class in order for them to learn about how to write well from one another. But, in my opinion, none of these reasons seem to be specific to memoir or the personal—meaning, teaching other essays could similarly accomplish these goals/objectives, even though I can see the appeal of using memoir.

But, Jim continues, that the memoir also requires them to think, and “it is wrongly perceived as having less intellectual labor.” He claims memoir seems to be an easy-‘A’ assignment, but in fact, it “is a cleverly disguised intellectual exercise.” He sees his students making intentional decisions, reflecting, struggling and grappling with the effects moments have on them and why these effects are significant. The way he sees memoir is that “it’s a critical thinking exercise; it’s an analysis of an event in my own life. But because they don’t think of it that way, they go, ‘I’m going to write about this and figure out what it all means.’ It’s disguised. It’s good.”

Jim believes his students do a lot of more critical thinking in writing their memoir essays than they realize. He says, “the best ones are imbued with significance. And not only have they figured out how this thing [writing] works, but they have acknowledged that this thing is me.

[Jim laughs.] That's a huge deal." This, of course, is in addition to what he hopes the students will learn while writing memoir, such as style, audience awareness, and descriptive writing. Jim also uses memoir to talk about ways to invent an essay and how to arrive at meaning and purpose in one's writing.

Jim defines memoir as "a story [which] attempts to uncover some meaning or some truth in the reflection of itself." Sometimes these reflections will lead the students to discover things about a moment that they had not realized before. He believes this discovery process is an aspect of writing where students struggle a great deal but also gain a lot of satisfaction.

Jim described to me what "A," "B," and "C" memoirs might look like. Beginning with "C" and working my way to "A," according to Jim, students can earn a passing "C" grade if they got the craft of the personal narrative down, meaning that there's evidence the student tried: there's scene, summary, and an attempt at dialog. To earn a "B," Jim believes students would need "to take a more thoughtful approach to organization and structure; it would illustrate a lot more intentional decisions by the writer, and it may touch upon significance, although it may not be 'tasteful' or 'subtle' as it could be. You may find a line like, 'I learned a lot from this experience.'"

Jim then described two memoirs he considers "'A'-quality." The more recent of the two was by a student whose memoir is about how she was poor and did not have the kinds of clothes her high school classmates had. She recollects how she was picked on and bullied by the other girls at her school. While this was going on, she was sought after by a guy who she deemed as poor as she was. Through his friendship and eventual romantic relationship she realized that money and appearances were not what life was about. The language was reserved and

understated. She clearly connected the past and the present, but she did it in a clever, subtle, didactic way rather than saying, ““What I learned from this experience....”” She demonstrated a fine use of narrative technique, like scene and summary, and wrote believable dialog. The memoir itself was good, but the story was poignant and contained lots of pathos. Jim said he would have given her an “A” on technique along, but he read it as a beautiful, touching piece and thought “this is publishable.”

The other memoir he shared with me was a humorous one about a student and his car. It was about how his uncle had promised him his old Camaro and about how much faith the writer put into the car’s ability to make him happy. Jim explains that “the discovery was quite simple that the having wasn’t as good as the wanting.” It was funny and clever and made the connection to the present clear at the end.

These essays were clearly written by students who already have a good handle on how to write well. Especially for those students who are nervous about composing for a college instructor or for students who are more unskilled and cumbersome with their written language, Jim finds memoir works best for these students as their first core essay.

He takes a more expressionistic pedagogical approach to teaching memoir and uses it to build his students’ confidence in their abilities to tackle an essay. Beginning with memoir, they write about something that they know rather than about some thing, some concept, or some issue they haven’t been exposed to before. When they have to write about something outside of themselves, they have to figure out how it works and what’s going on with it. In Jim’s experience, it’s harder for them.

And as David Bartholomae points out a fair number of times in his essay “Inventing the University,” first-year university students have a hard time imagining themselves as not only capable and comfortable of writing at the university level, but they have a hard time assuming the authoritative role in their essay’s subject matter. In memoir, the students are writing from their experience. This helps them to focus more on their writing techniques than having to divide their energy between “inventing the university” (writing as well as they can in a discourse they are still learning while attempting to display mastery over new knowledge) and shaping their argument all in the same first core essay. Jim asks them to be creative. He encourages them to write what they know. He then gave me a sample speech of how he gets his students to begin thinking about their memoir. He asks them,

“Haven’t you ever wanted anything in your life? What struggles did you have to go through to get it? Did you ever want something? How hard was it to get it? Did you learn anything along the way?” A lot of them will go through that; a lot of them will go into sports; some of them will write about divorce and things like that. When I start saying that, a lot of times the wheels start to spin. “Oh, okay, I’ve wanted things.” Cause it’s a consumer mentality. [Laughs] They usually can figure out something that they want. And that usually helps them to get ideas. But I don’t subscribe to the notion that nothing significant has ever happened to them. [...] I tell them, I could write you a story about a rock. “See that rock over there? [He points to an imaginary rock.] I can write you a novel about *that* rock!” Use your imagination. [Imitating a student voice] “But I don’t have an imagination; I’m a business major.”

And this humorous but all too realistic exchange highlights a point that Carol Lea Clark makes in her article “Student Voices: How Students Define Themselves as Writers.” Many students are never asked to be creative in their heavily weighted essays—this would be considered too imaginative and not academic in voice enough to maintain the appearance of good ethos throughout their arguments; neither are they encouraged to include their own experiences or perspectives—this would be considered too informal or pathos driven, and not factual enough to maintain the appearance of good logos throughout their arguments. As a result, many students are required to write dry text and to write themselves out of their writing to the point where they no longer put much of themselves (including their own thoughts) into their essays; as a result, they are prone to see themselves as students writing rather than student-writers. Clark asked her students, “Are you writers?” Her students said, “No.” I believe most if not all of Jim’s students at the start of the semester would answer “No” too. And this is one of the beauties of memoir; it requires the students to write as themselves and to write their thoughts into their written pieces. Perhaps after writing their memoir essays they might feel empowered just enough, even if for a fleeting moment, that if asked the question “Are you writers?” they might think, “Maybe?”

Jim encourages his students to be writers, to put imagination, creativity, description, and themselves back into their high-stakes writing. He sees memoir as a low-risk way to teach his students that being skillful writers is important, regardless of the genre, and that many would see themselves as writers, or at least better at writing, by writing themselves back into their own their work or becoming more active in the shaping of their discourse, regardless if they use the personal narrative. He believes that the skills they learn when writing memoir open their minds

to more creative possibilities and techniques and frees them from feeling locked into any writing form, and perhaps helping them to assume the active role of composing their text rather than seeing themselves as passive students writing text to fulfill assignment requirements.

In Peter Elbow's book *Everyone Can Write*, Elbow emphasizes how essential it is that students explore other genres of writing beyond the argumentative and research-based essays in their composition courses. He believes students must experience writing a variety of essays and compose for a variety of writing situations, for according to Elbow, "the best test of a writing course is whether it makes students more likely to use writing in their lives [...], but if we teach only academic discourse we will surely fail at this most important goal of helping students use writing by choice in their lives" (236). Jim ascribes to this philosophy, too. Writing is important to him; in fact, I would say that he is the kind of instructor Wendy Bishop seems to have in mind in her essay when she describes herself and others like Peter Elbow and Donald Murray as "teacher-writer, writer-teacher" in "Place to Stand: The Reflective Writer-Teacher-Writer in Composition." Jim not only wants to encourage his students to write during his course, but he wants to inspire them to want to become life-long writers.

With all that said, it seems Jim also has a personal agenda with teaching memoir, which is to introduce his students to the art of creative writing. He knows that many of his students will fulfill their humanities requirements with courses like history and philosophy, which are textbook heavy at this level. He believes his class might be the only chance his students will ever have a chance to practice creative writing, or writing of any kind other than research and argumentative essays, under the guidance of a writing instructor. "And," he adds, "then some might...might really...love it and go on to become creative writers. So there's an opportunity for



exposure right there. Or [in a kidding voice] I can talk someone into becoming a starving artist.

[Laughs] I don't know why I'd want to do that, but it's possible."

He goes on to say that writing the memoir ultimately becomes a discovery process within itself for his students to uncover the meanings in their experiences and then share these discoveries with their readers. And he feels it is more than this, too. The memoir is about making a meaningful connection with the readers. According to Gian Pagnucci in his book *Living the Narrative Life*, we are a storytelling species and personal, nonfiction narratives help us to "connect what we know to what we're trying to understand. They make things personal, give things meaning. They make things matter" (9). Jim believes memoir is "a presentation of a life" and that in it his students aim to become intimate with their readers and "say, hey, here's something that happened to me and maybe it touches upon something that is common or something universal or something clever" that their readers have experienced, too. In Pagnucci's words, through his teaching memoir, Jim's students learn how to "make things personal, give things meaning" and to "make things matter" in their writing and in connecting with their readers all while writing what seems to them to be not a whole lot more than a really good, interesting, and true story (9).

### ***Laura***

Laura is the most passionate about teaching memoir of the instructors I interviewed. When I asked her whether she believed there was room for the personal in argument, with much emotion in her voice, she responded: "Argument is personal!" She values students' voice and their sense of self and wants them to understand that writing is both a personal and an active process.

Laura reminds me of what Gary A. Olson would describe as a Donald Murray-type of writing teacher—she believes in the personal and the importance of being able to locate oneself in ones writing. She strongly values the importance of finding ones voice.

Laura believes that many of her students don't feel they are at a point yet in their academic careers to be able to produce writing of much value. To them, writing feels more like an academic, intellectual exercise. For this reason, Laura believes that a critical first step in getting her students to feel that their writing is more than an exercise and can be meaningful to them and their audience is instilling in her students the value of voice.

The memoir essay provides them a place to find themselves in their writing, to examine what they know and the value of this knowledge, who they are to this knowledge and how they became to believe what they know. Lad Tobin writes in his essay "Process Pedagogy," that he needed to cease teaching conventions, correcting and grading drafts, rather he needed to respond to each essay as "perceptively and creatively as possible."

He continues:

My primary job was not to tell the writer where she had gone wrong or right but to help her see what she had accomplished and what the essay might become in its next incarnation. I was now reading not for error and assessment but for nuance, possibility, gaps, potential. For the first time, I realized that student essays were texts to be interpreted, discussed, marveled at, and that writing students were, amazingly enough, writers (6).

Unlike Tobin, Laura is more conventional in the sense that she also reads and assesses for "error and assessment," but like Tobin (and Patricia A. Sullivan) she marvels at her students'

abilities to write meaningful text and reads for “nuance, possibility, gaps, and potential” (Tobin 6). She is interested in what her students have to say and encourages her students to see themselves as writers. She also encourages her students to read good literature and includes in each of her courses the selected readings the university chooses for each academic year. The year I interviewed Laura, the university selected the novel, *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini. The previous year her students read the university-selected text, *Brutal Imagination* by Cornelius Eady, which is a collection of poems that tell a unified story.

Laura prefers to pair teaching composition with a piece of literature containing a reflective component. She believes that pairing a personal, reflective text (regardless of whether it is a work of narrative fiction or narrative nonfiction) with memoir gives the students opportunities to explore their value systems while reading about someone else’s. It provides them with a vehicle for simultaneously viewing their values along side a value system they might not have been exposed to or thought deeply about before. It also allows the students to journey along the same path as the character(s) and make the same choices of the character(s) and then see how they along with the other characters in the story feel and react. She refers to the texts as a “*loci*” or a “point of origin;” reading someone else’s story is the place where her students begin thinking about their own stories.

She said that *The Kite Runner* worked well, and that she had much success using *Brutal Imagination* the previous year. She said that both texts are about choices that we make in life and how these choices affect our lives and the lives of others—very memoir-esque. She also noted that Hosseini’s and Eady’s works of narrative fiction read as personal, political, cultural, and historical texts, and stressed the point that politics, culture, and history are all “personal” because

each of these affect every one of us, and all seamlessly intersect with teaching the “significance” component to writing memoir.

Laura believes the personal narrative is where her students’ perceptions and value systems can be found and examined, and it is there where their beliefs and opinions can take shape and where controversies, revelations, and dissent are born. She wants them to figure out the significances of their experiences and see how these experiences help to establish our perceptions and value systems, which inform how we interpret personal, local, national, and world events and how we choose to interact with and view people. For Laura, memoir is about the self but it is greater than self, too—a commentary about the self, and she uses memoir as a pathway for her students to see memoir as a sort of social commentary where they make connections between their personal experiences to a trend, idea, or pattern in the greater community or world in which they live. She believes that in order to make this personal and intellectual leap, they must first establish what they think and why they feel the way they do about the subject, why they value it the way they do—and according to Laura, that’s memoir’s objective. It’s not about throwing in a little fun, creative nonfiction into the mix and introducing them to composition in a soft, “we all care about what you think” way; she sees it as the basis and point-of-origin essay for them to start thinking about their authentic selves in their authentic voice, and in their voice to explore what they think and how these thoughts intersect with something greater and outside of themselves. Memoir is a place where they begin to identify their values and beliefs, locate where they come from, and reflect upon what these values and beliefs have to say about them and about all of us.

I would be remiss if I didn't include this excerpt from my interview with Laura. She spent a bit of time discussing why she believes memoir is important to the curriculum and understands that there will always be instructors who disagree with teaching memoir in composition or feel that it doesn't fit in with their particular pedagogy. Laura presented one of her memoir assignments and her students' work at a national conference. At the conference, she heard professors and instructors of composition say, "Oh, we don't even have memoir. We wouldn't even consider memoir. It's not part of our curriculum. We wouldn't even *think* to put this in.' And that really haunts me that they don't see the correlation [of exposing students to different genres of writing]."

Laura thinks that the instructors who don't see the value in teaching memoir are missing this point. She believes that they "just view [memoir] as a creative writing assignment and or 'go ahead and tell a story,' and they don't see that dialog of putting you in the moment or using significant details are the kinds of writing devices that we use in other facets of writing and essay creation—but it is true; you will use those. You will use dialog in an argument. You will use dialog in a social commentary." She believes learning how to tell a story is important to learning how to write well. In fact, Gian Pagnucci writes in his text, *Living the Narrative Life*, that stories are important because they "connect what we know to what we're trying to understand. They make things personal, give things meaning. They make things matter." Reflecting back to the problems he had in teaching his research class, "I was making it an abstract exercise. Something impersonal and boring. I had cut out the stories" (9).

The problem, as Laura sees it, is that these professors and instructors view memoir as just a story, a creative writing piece that adds minimal academic benefit to their courses. According

to Sandra Stotsky in her essay “The Uses and Limitations of Personal or Personalized Writing in Writing Theory, Writing Research, and Instruction,” one of the major claims composition scholars and instructors make against the use of the personal narrative in composition is that an emphasis on personal writing “may leave [students] with little practice in learning how to locate information and ideas in external sources of knowledge, how to evaluate their quality and relevance, how to incorporate them with integrity, and how to integrate them coherently with their own reflections about the topic itself” (765). Stotsky pretty much sums up how I felt about teaching memoir the first semester I taught composition as a graduate teaching student and perhaps it’s also how the instructors at the conference felt, too.

When I was an undergrad at UCF, I was one of the students who arrived at college not knowing how to invent, structure, or write an academic essay. It wasn’t until I was nearly a junior in college when one of my literature professors sat me down in her office and taught me. I didn’t want any of my students with limited essay-writing knowhow to go through college never learning how to write a solid essay or never feeling proud of their writing. As I mentioned in a previous chapter, I co-created an assignment that married proposal writing with the memoir so I could teach memoir, which I was required to do, but I could also teach another essay genre which I believed would help students learn to write well beyond the personal. I don’t believe Laura sees she is doing a disservice to any of her students by teaching memoir—in fact, I believe she sees teaching memoir as great educational opportunity for them.

Laura’s objective for teaching memoir is to tie a personal event to a larger audience. She sees this essay as requiring critical thought. For those who don’t recognize the value of memoir in teaching composition, she wishes these instructors would see how memoir teaches students

critical thinking by requiring them to write, for example, about relationships between fathers and children by carefully selecting a particular moment from their lives and then sharing this moment with their audience by illustrating their relationships with their fathers through these moments. She explained that the difference between a good story and memoir is that by the end of the piece, in a memoir, the audience learns something about the writer's father. And in that thread, in understanding that relationship, the audience might tap in to the relationships that they had with their fathers and how that relationship has shaped their values and biases and subsequently helped to shape our culture.

Like Laura, Karen Surman Paley, in her article "The Social Construction of 'Expressivist' Pedagogy," encourages the examination of family through personal narratives in composition classes. Paley explains that the writing about family in composition helps students to understand our society's values by first examining our values and where our values came from, which she reiterates, is our families.

Paley, as does Laura, suggests that there is no better place to begin to understand ourselves, our community, and our culture than by examining our families' values. She writes, "The tendency to view essays about the self as 'inconsequential,' to borrow a word from Susan Miller, outside the classroom overlooks the fact that, for example, the family system is a site both of individual development and political consciousness. It is often the place where individuals experience abuse and oppression" (178). And this is one of the reasons Laura wants her students to examine where they come from and who they come from when they write memoir, so that through the writing process, they begin to develop a deeper appreciation for why

they believe what they believe and how their beliefs and ingrained subjectivities color how they understand what they see.

Returning to *Living the Narrative Life*, by Gian Pagnucci, Pagnucci stresses the same point Laura makes about finding the significance in our everyday lives and then sharing this significance with others. He writes, “I’ve tried to show how stories from my life can illuminate the ideas I’m talking about, can help readers connect back to the stories in their own lives” (28). Laura wants to help her students to make writing a personal and public experience. For so long, her students have been told to write themselves out of the school writing assignments that really matter, which often tend to be the heavily graded research papers and academic essays. Pagnucci writes, “We’ve made the academic experience so alienating that even we don’t really belong” (29).

Laura believes that we first need to carve out a space for our students to just write. Memoir helps her to do that. She then begins to speak so passionately about memoir. (I’m including a rather large chunk of text so you can get a sense for how much heart she puts in to the teaching of memoir. I believe a summary of the following text would just not convey her passion.) She asked me:

If the whole objective or philosophy of higher learning is to gain knowledge and also to gain multiple perspectives, to be objective, to know how to make decisions out in the real world, then I don’t think you can dismiss however you go about [teaching] critical thinking, and when you start saying *that* isn’t academic, but *this* is...the fact is, the bigger question is: Does this help the student to think? Does this help the student form an opinion? Does this help the student to learn about



themselves, their community, and to develop a broader perspective of the world? Then I think we can evaluate whether it has merit in our program or not. But when we start labeling different types of genres, determining whether they have a place or not, because they don't seem to be as academic, I think we're losing the essence of why we're here and what we're supposed to be doing. Memoir helps students to establish critical thinking skills. Far more elementary than argument, but if it at least helps them to become more confident as critical thinkers, then we've done our job.

From this piece of the interview, I begin to see how Laura uses memoir for a variety of reasons, from teaching skills, to writing more effectively, to learning how to write critically about something that is personal and matters to her students; memoir is a much stronger and important essay in the curriculum when seen through the eyes of Laura. I can only imagine that her students know why they are writing memoir, or at least sense that there's an importance to this essay, and how writing this essay marks the start of their journey to becoming better writers. She said that at the end of her courses, she asks her students how they would recommend she change the class for her next semester of students or if there were any essays they felt were unnecessary—rarely do her students say the memoir should be removed from her syllabus the following semester; in fact, she says, they usually say memoir was one of the most important essays of the course for them and it needs to be kept in for her next semester of students.

However, in Sandra Stotsky's essay, "The Uses and Limitations of Personal or Personalized Writing in Writing Theory, Research, and Instruction," Stotsky cites a rather interesting point about students' perspectives, gender, and teaching the personal from Donald

Graves's book, *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*. In her article, she writes about how Graves suggests that too much personal, experience-based writing in a writing course might be detrimental to students of both genders. Based on National Assessment of Educational Progress studies cited in Graves's text, males tend to need more remedial writing classes in all levels of education than females, and the pedagogical trends toward including "experience-based writing may tend to devalue the kind of informational writing, in science and technology especially, that boys apparently find more congenial to their interests" (Stotsky 765). In a review Stotsky wrote about Graves's text *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*, Stotsky noted that females are more comfortable with personal writing and would prefer writing about themselves over writing about something outside of themselves. She furthers that if instructors design a class heavy with personal writing assignments, then they may be "unintentionally making it easy for girls to avoid learning much about the sciences and, in effect, limited their full intellectual development and career options" (765).

But this seems overly simplistic. What Graves does not address is that the feminist forms of meaning-making, like the personal narrative, were not even dreamed into academic prose until feminist scholars began carving out space for themselves. In Brenda Daly's article, "Radical Introspection in Scholarship and Teaching," she believes that the personal is necessary in composition, because if efforts are not made "to allow women to integrate their experiences and their schooling, their emotions and intellects, [then they will] continue to be misconstrued and devalued by university and college administrators" (82). She claims the inclusion of the personal narrative in academic scholarship and in composition classrooms arises from our need to counter "the historical exclusion of maternal thinking from higher education, an exclusion that resulted

from the ‘feminization’ of primary and secondary education. [...] As a result, higher education came to be defined by the absence of maternal values and practices” (82). And for this reason, Daly believes “the personal is political” and needs to have a respected place in composition pedagogy, teaching practices, and academic essays (79). But the inclusion of the personal and memoir essay in composition is still marginalized in the halls of English Departments, including those at UCF.

Laura is aware that she is in the minority among her colleagues—memoir was the most controversial essay or core in UCF’s Composition Program at the time of this interview. She recalled overhearing an instructor say to another in the hall just the other day, “I just don’t understand why we have them write memoir.” She kept coming back to the thought that somehow this instructor is failing to connect the value of teaching memoir with the community or how it presents an opportunity to the students to explore themselves, making them feel comfortable while also telling their audience something they intimately know and care about. Laura believes that these instructors don’t see critical thinking as having a place in memoir, believing that memoir is just a piece of narrative nonfiction that uses dialog and encourages figurative language but has minimal if any educational relevance to learning to write the academic essay. She believes their teaching and scope of thinking about thinking is conventionally bounded within constructivists’ views of pedagogy and rhetoric, that “critical thinking *must* be about argument. Critical thinking *must* be social commentary.” They limit themselves, and ultimately their students, to believing that the pinnacle of thinking and writing their students will do in their current-academic and post-academic lives will be about something *other* and outside of themselves. Laura feels it is they who do a disservice to their students—if

their students don't learn to value their thoughts and begin to explore their own value systems and how they arrived at them, then *they* are not on track to begin truly engaging in or viewing the world around them from an authentic, personal place, with their authentic, personal voice.

Laura believes it is fundamental to teach personal narrative in composition. David Bleich and Deborah H. Holdstein concur in their essay "Recognizing the Human in Humanities." They write,

It is no longer personal to be personal—it is fundamental. Once I include myself in the 'audience' my contribution changes: my words lose their hortatory status, and take on instead the role of invitation, contribution, membership, and studenthood. I am no longer bound to argue, to make points and cases, or to think that whoever reads my work must be persuaded. I am, rather, more conscious of being among others with comparable, though not identical, interests. (12)

Laura echoes Bleich's and Holdstein's views passionately in her interview. The personal is, in her words, "absolutely fundamental" in the teaching of composition. In fact, she said it would be hard for her to imagine teaching composition effectively without teaching a personal narrative essay. She believes memoir is fundamental to her students' education in writing and literacy not just for the stories they read and tell, but because the personal narrative requires the students to start thinking critically about themselves and how they see themselves fitting in the community and world in which they live. She sees the memoir as a great introductory essay for them to begin thinking about societal expectations, cultures, and traditions. For example, she says they can explore societal questions like: What is it about being late or the lateness of others that bothers them; or why doesn't their lateness or the lateness of others bother them? Why is sitting

down and eating a family meal important or unimportant to them? She says, more so than the actual story they tell, composition class “is the first place where they explore their own value systems, which then lends them to start thinking about: Well, why do I have a different opinion than you do about, let’s say, abortion? A lot of this is because of how we were raised, in the environment, in the very small home from which we come. And the memoir taps into that, and I think it is absolutely essential in a composition program.”

She describes well-written memoirs as “engaging, descriptive, and poignant.” She describes poorly a written memoir as “mundane, lacks relevancy, and has no narration.” Like Jim and Mike, Laura places much importance on her students developing their abilities to effectively use dialog, narration, dialog, and a little expository in their memoirs. What she values the most, though, is “the point of the story has to have relevancy for the larger audience. So, if they have written a great narrative but [they] have ended the story without threading through or giving me a final paragraph that tells me how this has somehow changed them or is significant in their life so that their audience can relate to it, then in fact they have missed the boat.”

Successful memoirs require critical thought and significant consideration. If students can take something personal then reveal how that personal is relevant to their audience, they are developing the skills needed for using the written word to create a public resonance of a most challenging kind. Helping student to examine and then convey importance through the written word at the college level gives them the opportunity to intersect their lives with the university and its discourse. Laura believes that if they can do this in memoir, they can do it in any other essay. On a personal and academic level, she adds, this is a most critical component of higher-level education to which all students could and deserve to have access.

### *Mike*

Mike's an affable guy and began speaking at length about the importance of memoir in his course. He begins the interview by laying out two core reasons he values memoir in his course: His first core reason for teaching memoir has three sub-components: voice, experience, and audience awareness. (1) He believes that having his students write memoir is critical in helping them to develop their sense of voice, which he defines as a sense-of-self or self-awareness; (2) he also believes that memoir allows them to see value in their experiences and that including their experiences in other genres of essays can transform otherwise dry writing into being more personable and rhetorically powerful; and (3) he teaches memoir to encourage his students to be aware of their audience as they compose. He stresses their understanding that their "reader-audience" is a critical component of the composition process and that this awareness needs to play an active role in their writing process.

His second core reason for teaching memoir is that he values how memoir underscores the importance of their first draft not being their final draft. He believes his students should use exploratory practices and critical thinking in every paper they write, because, upon further examination, often where their initial ideas would lead them is not always the place where they should end up. He believes memoir does a beautiful job of demonstrating this aspect of writing as a recursive process.

Mike defines memoir as an essay about "a personal experience through which you have learned something that influenced your life in a bigger way." I think this definition echoes the importance Mike places on the invention process in that to write an essay that fulfills this definition; the students must think critically about the moment they select. The experience of

doing this tends to necessitate the revision of initial ideas, because why they at first believed a moment was significant might in fact be not the entire reason for its significance upon further examination and rewrite.

However, and maybe I'm just picking apart his definition here more so than he intended I would or should, but he mentioned in the interview that "audience-awareness" was one of the core reasons he teaches memoir, but audience isn't a component of his memoir definition. Although the memoir is a personal piece written in first-person perspective, it is also a piece that is written with the purpose of gaining an adaptive audience. So I wondered, if Mike had time to sit with this question, if my interview were a list of a questions I emailed him and he typed his responses for each and emailed them back to me, would his answer have been different for the question, "What is your definition of memoir?" Would his answer have been more complete and included all of his core objectives?

So, upon analysis, it seems that voice and experience are the two reasons most intimately linked to the teaching of memoir, and although these are two great reasons to teach writing, it's been hard for me to understand why teaching any other essay genre or exploratory writing assignment wouldn't achieve the same end. Although he gives good reasons why he teaches writing, it's hard to say that memoir would be the only genre through which these core course objectives most effectively could be met.

I believe Mike is a good writing teacher and teaches memoir passionately. What is interesting about Mike's interview, and what he has taught me about memoir pedagogy, is that just because an instructor teaches memoir and is enthusiastic about the teaching of personal narrative, it doesn't necessarily mean that his/her students "get" why they are learning memoir. I

think Mike does a fine job, but in the end, I wonder how many of his students, who are not already amazing writers, significantly benefit from writing the memoir essay. When I asked if his students get why they are writing memoir in his class, he explains,

I don't think in conscious sense they do, but I do think that the realization, the value doesn't come until later. Hopefully, by the end of the course, but sometimes not until after they're done with all of their writing courses and they're working on their major courses, their upper division courses and then they start to remember that the value of voice, the value of personal experience, the importance of credibility, and emotional appeal. I don't think that comes, better than half of the time, till later.

Unlike Jim, but similar to Laura, Mike pairs his course with a piece of literature to help shape his course's theme and essay topics. The semester I interviewed him he used the same book Laura did, Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*. Inspired by the novel, the memoir assignment explored the breaking of social contracts. He described his memoir assignment to me: "Write about a time when you broke a social contract and what you learned from it."

Mike chose "social contract" as his theme for memoir and had his students read and discuss *The Kite Runner* to help the students identify what a social contract is and to see the breaking of social contracts in context of a narrative. According to John Trimbur in his composition textbook and reader *A Call to Write*, Trimbur writes, "successful memoirs make personal experiences significant to others [...]. A memoir aims for understanding—to help readers come to terms with the writer's experience of the past and its meanings for the present" (148). Mike gave me an example of the best memoir turned in to him that semester. He explained



to me the storyline: The memoir begins with the writer flashing back to when she was little girl and was playing flashlight tag with her friends. She positions herself within the memoir as the best flashlight tag player among her friends because she had never been tagged. Her teammates put a ten-dollar bounty on her because they each wanted to get her so badly. She writes about how she was betrayed by one of her friends, who when they hid together, swore that she was going to protect her. Mike describes how the student structured her memoir. She introduced each character and how they played the game as one of the characters counted down from one to fifty—fifty marking the beginning of the search. He felt that this was probably one of the best aspects about the memoir because it was so original.

What Mike said he liked about this memoir was that it was fun to read and chose an unusual way to approach the breaking of social contracts, and up to this point he never realized that a childhood game could be rich with social contracts and so deep and meaningful. I imagine it is this part of the memoir which Trimbur refers to as “help[ing] readers come to terms with the writer’s experience of the past and its meanings for the present” that moves Mike, more so than “successful memoirs make personal experiences significant to others,” which is what seems to move Laura (Trimbur 148).

Mike acknowledges that the memoir may look like a fluff assignment from afar, but he believes that if he teaches it well, then he is teaching his students the value of voice and personal experience in writing. Like Laura, he realizes that not all instructors who teach composition see the value in teaching memoir, but he believes that’s because they might not understand the connections memoir has with the teaching of writing. He calls the program’s curriculum an “intelligent design” and believes there is a natural progression from memoir, to commentary, to

review, to argument—and student voice and experience can be woven in to any one of these essays. He continues and says that he can understand why some instructors view memoir as a great “get-to-know-you” exercise. He said that in his class (and unlike in Jim’s), this is not one of his goals for memoir and should not be the attitude instructors take toward the teaching of this essay.

He does concede that working with his students to develop their memoirs does help him to get to know his students a little better, but that the goal, the reason it’s important his students can write a good memoir essay is “about getting his students to become self-aware” and “to understand their values and experience in the bigger world.” He does not deny that it helps to create a writing community in his classes, and he likes this aspect of the essay, but he acknowledges that a writing community can be created through any of the other essays, too.

Successful memoirs, according to Mike, require critical thought and significant consideration. If students can write about a personal moment and reveal how that personal moment is relevant and significant to their audience, then they are developing the core strategies needed to create public resonance of a most challenging kind.

Peter Elbow believes that being capable of writing their personal experiences is not just an expressivist’s idealized pedagogy but is a critical component toward becoming a functionally literate person. Like Mike, Elbow claims that “it is essential for students to learn how to “render experience” in writing rather than just to explain and inform experience in writing, because “[w]hen students leave the university unable to find words to render their experience, they are radically impoverished” (237). If students are not able to illustrate their own experiences in detail, then when a time comes where they need or want to retell or reflect upon something in

writing but they don't know how, then although they can read just fine, to a certain degree their functional literacy comes into question. Helping students to examine and then convey importance through the written word, at the college level, gives them the opportunity to intersect their selves with the university and its discourse. Personally and academically, Mike adds, this is a critical step for all students.

## CHAPTER 5

### *Introduction*

For the longest time I thought I was writing a relatively straightforward thesis on memoir and the personal narrative in composition. However, in the process of this study and in the writing of my thesis, I learned memoir pedagogy is significantly messier and more fascinating than I ever imagined.

The instructors I interviewed were invaluable in teaching me three things: 1) When teaching memoir as a part of a mandated curriculum, there is a good chance that many colleagues are not interested in teaching memoir; 2) Even if instructors who are mandated to teach memoir agree that memoir has a place in the teaching of composition, they may not agree on the goals/objectives for memoir and are likely not teaching memoir entirely for the sake of teaching memoir—in fact, many might have a memoir sub-curriculum, a curriculum that they bring to their course unsanctioned by the department or their composition program’s director, which greatly influences their teaching of memoir curriculum. Memoir in these instructors’ courses may function as a conduit through which they gain access to teaching something that matters to them; and 3) I learned that teaching memoir can be surprisingly complex, and if we are to teach memoir as an intellectual and creative writing exercise in composition, then we need to honor the complexity of memoir pedagogy and be specific in how discuss our teaching of memoir with our students.

### *Not everyone “gets” memoir*

Laura recounted overhearing an instructor in the hall say, “I just don’t understand why we have them write memoir.” And she remembered instructors at a national conference tell her

quite matter-of-factly, ““Oh, we don’t even have memoir. We wouldn’t even consider memoir. It’s not part of our curriculum. We wouldn’t even *think* to put this in.’ And that really haunts me....”

So why is it so clear to Laura that memoir is this invaluable essay in the teaching of composition, but to some others (who likely are just as intelligent and committed to good teaching practices and effective composition pedagogy), memoir is this essay that they “just don’t understand why we have them write” when it’s part of a mandated curriculum, or that memoir is an essay that they “wouldn’t consider” or “even *think* to put” in their composition program’s curriculum?

Laura seemed to have this rather uncomplicated way of viewing instructors with regard to how they viewed memoir. Throughout her interview she tended to see instructors as either “getting it” or “just not getting it.” I can see how tempting it is to ease into believing that if instructors or scholars emphatically say, “Yes!” to the teaching of memoir in composition, that they, too, would not only “get” and support my pedagogical choices and reasons for teaching this essay, but I would also “get” their choices and support the ways they teach this essay genre. But just because an instructor values memoir in composition and seems to (using Laura’s term) “get it” doesn’t necessarily mean that s/he sees the potential of memoir as others might see it, nor does it mean that other instructors who also “get it” would agree with one another on how memoir should be approached and taught to maximize it’s potential in a course. For this reason, we need to be careful with our approach to memoir in composition, and check to make sure our understanding of what “getting memoir” means isn’t too flat. It is true that some instructors just don’t believe that memoir can do or be more; however, even for those who seem to have a

deeper understanding of memoir and its place in composition pedagogy, memoir might be more complex than these instructors even recognize.

It seems we cannot assume why instructors are proponents or detractors of memoir in composition, and either way we cannot believe that if they value or discredit the value of memoir in composition that they must “get it” or “just don’t get it” as we do—memoir pedagogy is proving to be much more complex than this.

Before I began my study, I was a lot like Laura. I knew that scholars and instructors who felt as strongly for memoir in composition as I did were in the minority. And I believed that those who found promise in the teaching of memoir in composition saw memoir’s role as I did, and that my thesis would go to show the specific reasons (I was so smart—I knew them already) for why we should seriously “consider memoir” in composition and could shout from the rooftop of our English building these specific reasons as to why memoir matters in composition.

But what I found was not what I expected to find—and it was messy. Each instructor had a similar understanding of what memoir was and each believed it had a rightful place in his or her composition courses, but each instructor used memoir at some point in his or her teaching for his or her own purposes—and some purposes were ones I didn’t believe helped to argue for strengthening memoir’s status in composition.

Even though all three instructors were mandated by the program’s curriculum to teach memoir and they all said that memoir was their favorite essay to teach in their composition courses, only two of them taught memoir because they personally felt moved to teach memoir. I believed that if instructors identified memoir as their favorite essay to teach in composition, then they all must feel strongly about memoir’s place in composition pedagogy and curriculum. (Why

wouldn't they?) The fact that this wasn't necessarily the case challenged my somewhat flattened view of the way memoir is viewed and taught by composition instructors.

Then it got even messier. All three instructors enjoyed teaching memoir (including Laura who said in her interview that she taught memoir because she truly wanted to teach memoir), but not a single one taught memoir so that his or her students, time and again, would be able to consistently write extraordinary memoirs—memoir seemed to be not the end itself, rather it was a conduit through which the three instructors could ultimately focus on/teach something else.

Their motivations for teaching memoir differed and are as follows: For Jim, memoir served a dual purpose. It was an icebreaker essay that helped his students to forge a writing community and it allowed him to legitimately teach creative writing—his greatest passion in the teaching of writing—in a required, general education writing course. For Laura, memoir seemed to be the reason she taught memoir—but underneath this, memoir's purpose was to help her students explore social epistemic rhetoric and experience what it felt like to write an essay, as heavily weighted and important as their argument essays, in their own, voices. Mike taught memoir as a workhorse essay that he used to underscore the importance of voice, experience, audience-awareness, and revision, which all helped prime his students for writing the more demanding essays later in the semester and in their future calls to write.

And though all three instructors graded their students' memoir and cared about their students' successes with writing this essay, their students' abilities to write polished memoirs seemed not to be where they felt memoir's value in composition currently lies. Interestingly, it was not the memoir essay itself that generated their excitement for teaching this essay; rather, it was memoir's versatility that excited them because it was in this malleable nature of memoir

where they could carve out a space for themselves and what they valued while still teaching a heavily weighted and personal essay in their course. Memoir provided these instructors with their own paths to teach what they seemed to most value in the teaching of writing. Perhaps this is the reason why Jim said in his interview that he isn't particularly excited by memoir as a genre but it is his favorite essay to teach in composition, why Laura expresses such passion for teaching the personal and social epistemic rhetoric through memoir, and why Mike believes there is really no better essay to begin his course than with memoir.

As a result, teaching memoir in composition proved to be more complex upon analysis than it appeared to be at first glance. But, memoir's ability to be so much more than memoir and yet still remain distinctively memoir might be a reason why it should enjoy a consistently higher status in composition curriculum.

*Promise of the Memoir Essay  
as Sub-Curricula in College Composition Pedagogy*

The memoir essay seems to be used by the instructors I interviewed as a conduit through which they taught something else that mattered to them and could be tied to memoir. According to the instructors, it appears that the teaching of memoir is not taught for the pure sake of teaching memoir in composition, like commentary, review, and argument. I understand the traditional, textbook reasons for teaching memoir, but it seems like while these are being taught, another curriculum—a sub-curriculum of sorts—is being taught, too, and this sub-curriculum seems to greatly affect the pedagogical choices the instructors make and shifts how the instructors teach their course more so than the seemingly apparent reasons they teach memoir in the first place.



Memoir is Jim's favorite essay to teach in composition, but he says he's not tied to it by any means. But memoir is Jim's entryway to teaching creative writing in composition, and this is where memoir's value and sub-curriculum comes in: Memoir is what makes writing compelling scenes and action, narration, descriptions, and dialog justifiable to teach in his composition classes and matter to his students. He believes his course gives his students what might be their only chance left in their academic careers to write creatively under the guidance of a writing teacher and for a major grade. However, he says his students mostly see memoir as a neat essay where they get to write a story about themselves; it's an icebreaker essay that allows them an opportunity to know a little more about each other and gently warms them up to the more challenging and "boring" essay genres Jim will introduce later in the semester.

In Gian Pagnucci's text, *Living the Narrative Life*, Pagnucci addresses the use of the personal narrative as a way to ease students in to the more traditionally taught essays, like argument. He claims that in many composition courses, "[n]arratives are viewed as an easy place to start, whereas the abstract essay is what is prized" (43). And this is part of what Jim describes is going on in his classes. The core purpose for including memoir is for his students to ease into his course with a "get-to-know-you" kind of personal essay before moving on to the less personal and more "academic" essays. What separates Jim's approach to memoir from the kind of course's pedagogy that fits Pagnucci's description is not that Jim values the memoir essay more than most instructors do—Jim finds that it works great as "an easy place to start"—but what separates Jim's perspective from Pagnucci's description, and perhaps distinguished him from many other instructors who see memoir just as a good "icebreaker," is that Jim ultimately takes memoir in a different direction.

So why does Jim teach memoir? The obvious answer to this question is Jim teaches memoir because it is mandated by the curriculum. However, I believe beyond this reason, Jim teaches memoir because he wants his students to aspire to write like writers while in his course and to create something that matters to them and their readers. He wants his students to feel excited by their words and to feel confident that they have the writing skills needed to express themselves clearly, concisely, and compellingly regardless of what genre(s) or for what reason(s) they are writing. I think he believes that if writing a piece of creative nonfiction can help his students to feel something liberating or exciting when they write, then maybe they will be inspired or feel compelled to write for reasons besides school or work. But even if they only sit down and write for school and work purposes, he hopes that the descriptive, narrative techniques they learn from writing memoir in his class will move them to write more inspired pieces in their other classes and eventually as professionals in their chosen careers. Peter Elbow believes that what makes a composition course successful “is whether it makes students more likely to use writing in their lives” (236). Jim feels that if he can do this, then he feels his course would truly have had a lasting impact on his students.

For Laura, memoir’s sub-curriculum has a more feminist slant/rhetorical design. It seems to create a space for her students to enter and experience empowerment through writing in their own words and style; most importantly, it provides a place for her students to discover how they know what they know through better understanding how their experiences connect with others; memoir creates a space for them to view their personal experiences as significant sources of meaning-making and as ways to appeal more powerfully to their audience.

Laura's approach to memoir reminds me of Nan Elsasser and what she strove to do in her all-women, advanced literacy course at the College of the Bahamas as described in her and Kyle Fiore's essay, "'Strangers No More': A Liberatory Literacy Curriculum." Elsasser felt her women students needed to believe that their words could say something meaningful and their writing could do good and change their community for the better. She wanted her students to feel a sense of ownership and empowerment when they put their thoughts on paper. She wanted them to experience what it feels like to write and pursue knowledge meaningful to them. In their words and in their voice, Elsasser's students used personal narratives to actively tap into their body of knowledge and engage in discourse about a subject they knew intimately well. By making their personal experiences public in a meaningful way, they revealed the significance and social impact of their collective knowledge, established public resonance, and felt their words and voice empowered in the process.

Laura views the teaching of memoir in composition as a social commentary of the self and sees it as functioning similarly to Elsasser's approach to teaching personal narratives. She hopes her students see that they can "intervene in their own social environment," and in a critically conscious way, write meaningful text powerfully as themselves (Elsasser 291). Laura wants her students to be comfortable with themselves when they write, to know that through a critical examination of points when their experiences intersect with their society that they can say something that matters; they can use narration to tell a personal story, and they can do this in their voice which embodies strength and purpose, without feeling they need to distance themselves from their writing. She says her students feel a sense of freedom from the binding nature of academic discourse when their first paper is a personal narrative in their words, in their

writing style, similarly to how they speak, and similar to how they tell a story when they sit down with another person to share and connect. Memoir allows her to teach her students to use language that develops and refines their particular style of writing because they write about something that matters to them and that they chose to share.

Laura emphatically said in her interview that teaching the personal is “absolutely fundamental” in the teaching of argument and composition. With great enthusiasm she seems to echo David Bleich and Deborah H. Holdstein’s philosophy in their essay, “Recognizing the Human in Humanities.” where Bleich and Holdstein write that with teaching argument, “it is no longer personal to be personal—it is fundamental” (12). Laura believes memoir is fundamental to her students’ literacy, and not just for the stories they read and tell, but also for learning how to argue effectively. For to learn how to argue effectively, her students must be able to examine and explain why they believe what they believe as well as see how what they believe fits in with the beliefs of their discourse communities. She sees memoir as a great introductory exercise to teaching argument, writing what matters to them, finding confidence to write in their authentic voice while exploring themselves through a social epistemic rhetorical lens.

Mike is passionate about memoir in his course and he sees, in his words, an “intelligent design” in how the course is constructed and how Composition 1 flows into Composition 2. Yet, on some level, he also represents the type of instructor who likes teaching memoir for reasons other than “learning” memoir.

Since Mike places great emphasis on voice, audience-awareness, and writing as a recursive process, his sub-curriculum for teaching memoir seems to be in place to help his students realize that their experiences and voice (which he defines as acknowledgement of self

while writing, whether that be in first-person or third-person) are relevant, that awareness of audience is vital to communicating thoughts effectively, and that revision is key to writing well, meaning their first drafts and initial thoughts aren't necessarily worthy of being their final drafts or thoughts.

What's interesting about Mike's sub-curriculum is that his definition of memoir excludes two of his sub-reasons for teaching memoir: voice and audience. Here's a reminder of Mike's definition of memoir: Memoir is "a personal experience through which you have learned something that influenced your life in a bigger way." I believe that this goes to demonstrate how when he thinks about what memoir is, he sees it as an essay, but when he goes about to teach memoir, something happens. As in Mike's case, pedagogy seems to transform memoir from an essay where the writers explore "a personal experience through which [they] have learned something that influenced [their] life in a bigger way" into a teaching device used to make the inclusion of voice, experience, audience, and the often undervalued importance of revision paramount and germane in the teaching of the remaining "academic" essays in his course.

He uses memoir's sub-curriculum to underscore the importance of seeing the writing process as a recursive process and that first thoughts and first drafts should lead to deeper thoughts and more thoughtful drafts, and he believes that seemingly insignificant personal moments can be ripe with meaning if the audience is kept in mind and the moment is viewed through a critical lens. Like Peter Elbow, Mike wants his students to have access to the written word, and he uses memoir as a way to encourage them to begin expressing themselves in their own words in writing. And like the other two instructors, Mike cares about his students and wants them to become better writers. He "gets" why many instructors use the memoir as an

icebreaker or “get-to-know-you” essay, and he sees the value in that, but he believes that memoir serves (and should serve) a more meaningful purpose in composition classes. However, I believe the “more meaningful purpose” Mike refers to is not actually referring to teaching memoir in the class itself, rather this “more meaningful purpose” memoir serves is the access he gains to teaching his own intelligently designed sub-curriculum by way of teaching the memoir essay itself to his class.

***Recommendations for Teaching Memoir in Composition: Be Descriptive and Use Convincing Dialogue***

For many instructors who teach composition, one of the goals of composition is to familiarize students with a variety of reasons to write and to help students to ultimately be able to consistently compose research papers and the argument essay. When it comes to argumentative essays, instructors’ goals/objectives for their students are pretty straightforward and typically inspired by Classical Rhetoric: to identify a position; to defend their position by arguing logically and effectively; to find reputable sources to cite in support of position; to effectively structure a concise and logical argument, and so forth. Even though performing all of these steps are important in the process of writing an argument, ultimately the primary goal/objective of this assignment is for students to acquire the skills and techniques needed to research well and consistently write effective arguments.

Usually the reason we teach an essay in composition is because it is an essay valued in many fields of study, and as such, is an essay our students likely will need to write for their other courses. Our goals/objectives as composition instructors is for our students to master the writing processes of a variety of essays so they can consistently and effectively compose these specific

genres of essays in the future. And because most essays are taught with mastery of composing in mind, we place greater significance on the genres of essays students will likely encounter and be assigned to write. Most students, if not all, will need to have some general level of mastery of writing arguments and research-based essays in order to be successful in their coursework. We, as writing teachers, play a significant role in preparing them for their future writing successes.

However, if we think about memoir in these terms, that our ultimate goal with teaching an essay genre in composition is for our students to learn how to think about and consistently compose well in that genre, then memoir seems to be in a position of losing its footing with instructors and in composition pedagogy, and perhaps this helps to explain why Laura heard instructors in the hall and those at the conference say they “don’t get why” or “wouldn’t even *think* to teach memoir.” How often will most students *need* to write personal narratives or memoirs in their future college courses and professional careers? And, with a finite amount of time to work with our students on mastering the commonly assigned essays at the college level, I can totally understand why memoir seems out of place to many instructors who teach composition curriculum.

I believe the way many instructors and scholars think about and approach the teaching of memoir is similar to the way they think and approach the teaching of any of the other more commonly taught essays in composition—and I propose that if you and I think and approach memoir with this perspective, then we are missing out on a valuable aspect memoir pedagogy can bring to our teaching of composition. I believe that memoir is ripe with sub-curricular opportunities and thereby is different from the other more commonly taught genres of essays; as such, it is imperative that we think and approach the teaching of memoir differently too.

All three instructors seem to have a substantial sub-curriculum, a curriculum that they bring to their course unsanctioned by the department or their composition program's director, which greatly influences their official teaching of memoir curriculum. The fact that each instructor seemed to have his or her own sub-curriculum for memoir potentially can mean that the goals/objectives for the memoir assignment are unique for each course. As a result, actualizing the promise of memoir in composition seems to play out differently depending upon the agenda/sub-curriculum of the instructor who is teaching the course.

I believe it is important for the directors who include memoir in their composition program's curriculum and for the instructors who are teaching memoir in composition to be specific in their language when explaining why they teach memoir in composition and what their goals/objectives are for their program, courses, and students, especially since it is likely that many students will default to seeing memoir as an easy, "get-to-know-you" ancillary assignment unless instructed otherwise.

For this reason, I believe a change needs to be made in the way we discuss teaching this complex, and to some, seemingly out of place essay; rather than the assignment being the memoir essay, which might convey the message to students that the main reason for this assignment is to learn how to write a memoir essay, which was not entirely the case for any of the three instructors, I believe it is important that we be more specific in our language. Since the ultimate reasons, or sub-curriculum, behind teaching memoir was different for each of the instructors I interviewed, perhaps the language we use in the way we assign the memoir essay needs to be descriptive and different—specific to us and our purposes—for teaching memoir.



Starting even with how we title the assignment—rather than giving it a standard “The Memoir” assignment title—perhaps we can begin communicating our reasons behind the teaching memoir with our students even before we introduce them to our rationales and objectives for this assignment. Here are some example titles from off the top of my head: “Harnessing and empowering our voices through social awareness in the writing of memoir” or “Development of character and narrative techniques through memoir” or “My thoughts matter: Making the personal narrative resonate with my audience.” These assignment titles are just examples, but they go to show how we can begin defining our goals/objectives with the first words of our memoir assignments to shape and bring into focus our sub-curriculum in teaching memoir to our students. Perhaps using more specific language in the way we assign, present, and discuss memoir and memoir in composition pedagogy can encourage both instructors and their students to honor the complexity of the assignment and move into the writing of memoir in composition with a more academic and focused perspective.

Memoir in composition is complex and seems to mean different things to different instructors. Reflecting back to my small sample of instructors who each used it differently as his or her own rich assignment with myriad of possibilities for his or her students to encounter a variety of ideas and writing skills and techniques. This just goes to show how critical it is for instructors to be able to acknowledge and identify their purposes for teaching memoir and then to make their specific goals, objectives, and expectation they have for this essay known to their students. It's not enough to say to students, "For your first core essay, you'll be writing a memoir" and then explain what memoir is, have students read a couple examples of the essay, and then they begin working on writing their own. If this is the instructors' chosen approach,

which seems to be similar to the approach Jim and Mike take with their students, then their students might be unsure as to why they are writing memoir in a composition course designed to prepare them for writing well in current and future college courses which will likely never assign them this essay. Maybe this is partly why Jim and Mike said that many of their students see memoir as a fluff writing assignment—a first essay designed to warm them up for the more important remaining three essays which are the ones that will help them to become more effective at planning, thinking about, researching, and writing argument essays.

So what’s so powerful about memoir in composition if the focus is not on “teaching” memoir?

Memoir, more so than commentary, review, and argument (the other three core essays our program required instructors to teach at the time of this study), gives instructors the latitude to carve out a space for themselves to work their own passions into their teachings in a usually highly restrictive curriculum while at the same time creating a place for students to freely write themselves back into their essays. Even though it can appear at first that one of the main reasons behind teaching memoir in composition is that it eases the students into more complex writing situations, the beauty of memoir is that it can be effectively used just as that for some instructors and their students if that is their intended purpose. However, for other instructors, or for even the same instructors who use it as an icebreaker essay, it can be more than that too—it can bring creative writing to composition; it can teach presence of voice, origin of perspectives, and the value of our thoughts and experience in our writing; it can help underscore the importance of revision, reflection, and significance of thoughts: It can be all, some, or none of these and still help students to become more critical thinkers and better writers.

For the instructors I interviewed, it turns out that it is actually in the process of teaching and writing memoir, not in the memoir essay itself, that allows them to bring what they personally feel is important into their composition courses; and where they find great value in memoir is in the vast scope and pedagogical choices that comes with teaching this complex essay.

If I were to extrapolate these findings to describe a larger group of instructors who are mandated to teach memoir and who also value and support memoir in composition, I might find that many of their rationales for teaching memoir in composition would be nearly as varied as the number of instructors in the sample group. In fact, it is likely that what the instructors truly show interest in teaching, what they find of value when they seem to be clearly espousing delight in the teaching of memoir, might not be as simplistic as an affection for personal narratives in composition or even for the memoir essay itself. Teaching memoir in composition has turned out to be more complex than this.

It's kind of funny, my favorite memoir essays to read are the ones where the memoirists recount rather mundane moments from their lives and, at the end, reflect upon how their seemingly ordinary experiences reveal some greater understanding about themselves, life, and our shared humanity. It kind of happened unexpectedly, but I feel like this is what I experienced in writing my thesis. The instructors helped me to see how this seemingly ordinary essay that gets overlooked, cast down upon as too simplistic or pedestrian to "even *think* to teach" or write in composition, can in fact be more freeing in scope, transformative in nature, and significant in the teaching of composition and what matters to those who teach writing than just about any other essay genre. Memoir gave these instructors the opportunity to be the writing teachers they

wanted to be for their students. It's this unique quality that makes memoir so magical, so personal, and from a pedagogical standpoint, incredibly complex, promising, and empowering.

**APPENDIX:  
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS WITH JIM, LAURA, AND MIKE**

## Jim

What is your teaching philosophy for teaching Composition 1?

If you could choose the four cores for your Composition 1 class, what would they be?

Would you put more essays of that sort in [memoir or creative fiction] your course?

Now this semester, in Comp 1, one of their could-be required texts is a historical fiction text. Are you going to be using that in your class?

What is your definition of a memoir?

Do you believe memoir or personal memoir belongs in academia?

Okay, so what I hear you saying is, when you're talking about narrative as narratives, there is personal narrative and there are other types of narratives. Because personal narrative means that the narrative is about the personal. So, you said that narratives belong in academia, but do you believe that personal narrative belongs in academia?

When you teach memoir, do you prefer to teach it as the first, second, third, or fourth core essay?

What is your pedagogical rationale for this choice?

Do think that that could be considered less rigorous, or that our expectations for our students are lower than they should be?

Does the memoir then serve like a diagnostic?

Would you describe one of the best [student] memoirs you read?

Do you feel your students need to overcompensate for their lack of skills, their lack of perceived skills, and so they beat the reader over the head with theme, examples, logos, ethos?

So is the memoir a rule breaker, a renegade essay?

What would you say the students struggle the most with in their memoirs?

Do you feel that that summarization leads into their other essays that they feel they need to summarize in the commentary, review, and argument, as opposed to putting their own opinions or their own perceptions?

Do you bridge memoir essays with academic writing or the writing they will do in their majors?

But personal writing in argument, could, okay, I'll just say it, shows biases. But, you're saying, sometimes it's okay.

How do you go about teaching memoir?

How do you get them to write in academic writing?

Let's say you're writing a journal for College English or CCC.

That to me is what separates it.

How important do you believe the memoir is to your students learning academic writing?

So, would you say that teaching memoir as one of the four cores in an introduction to academic writing course could, and I put an emphasis on 'could,' change academic writing?

Do you think that's why memoir is in a composition course?

How do you get them to write evocatively about a subject?

What must your students have in their memoirs to earn a passing grade?

What do you think your students learn from revising their memoirs?

How do you think students connect the memoir with the outside world?

Makes you wonder what they were writing before.

Do they see a purpose for writing memoir in their composition 1 class?

Do they buy into it?

Do you think it's an easier essay?

What's boring about it?

So, what's the difference between thinking and writing a memoir?

Do you think that a reason why personal narrative or memoir is scoffed at by more traditional academicians is for that very reason? Because I don't have to think about something outside of myself, and how does it work, and so it seems like it's composed with less intellectual labor. And if it contains less intellectual labor, then it means it as less value.

What kind of memoirs do expect from your class this semester?

In three adjectives, describe what you hope your students' memoirs will be.

**Laura**

What is your teaching philosophy for teaching Composition 1?

What are your specific goals with teaching memoir?

How important is the memoir essay to the Composition 1 course?

What is your definition of a memoir?

Why do you assign the memoir essay to your students?

Do you believe memoir or personal narrative belongs in academia?

Why do you think instructors aren't tapping into the power of memoir

It comes closer to you being the subject in your writing than it does to being an author-evacuated, traditional scholar.

When you teach memoir, do you prefer to teach it as a first, second, third, or fourth core essay?

Do you bridge the memoir essay with academic writing and/or with the writing they will do in their majors?

How do you teach memoir?

How do explain the relevance of learning memoir?

How do you define academic writing?

Do you think that your students take memoir seriously? As seriously as review, commentary, or argument?

What must your students do in their memoir to earn a passing grade, say a B or above?

What do you believe students connect or associate memoir with?

In three adjectives, could you capture what your student memoirs are like.

In three adjectives, C or below memoirs

### **Mike**

What is your teaching philosophy/goals for teaching Composition 1?

What are your goals for teaching memoir?



When students are working on their memoir at home, do you think that they own what you said?

If you could choose four essays to teach in Composition 1, would memoir be one of them?

How do you see the relationship between Composition 1 and Composition 2 courses?

Is that your perception? Or is that how you see students?

If we start off with memoir and then we end up with argument at the end of Comp 1 and then in Comp 2, analysis of an argument etc. etc.... Do you feel like we're walking students away from the personal "subjective" into the academic "objective"?

Do you think that memoir is important enough to be told by the people who put the curriculum together what the motivation is for this essay, followed by this essay, and the progression there in?

What is your definition of a memoir?

How do you connect memoir to the goals of your course?

I know that we talked about the curriculum being an intelligent design. Do you think that, based on what we just said, that if commentary is a combination of memoir and review, what if the order of teaching were: memoir, review, commentary, argument?

Who is the audience for memoir?

When do you introduce rhetoric into your Comp 1 class?

Do you believe that memoir/personal narrative belongs in academia?

Describe one of the best memoir essays one of your students wrote this semester.

So the concept of the essay was great. What else made it a really good memoir?

Generally speaking, what do students do well in their memoirs?

Generally speaking, what do they struggle with the most?

Is showing, being descriptive, using imagery a huge component?

How does that translate into the final, core 4 (research/argumentative) essay?

Do you ever discuss bridging or helping students to bridge the academic essay with the personal with academic writing that they will be doing in their majors or in their future professional lives?

Now, you said that you had used Kite Runner as an introduction to the course, which led into the writing of the memoir. Can you tell me about that?

Have you used books like this before to introduce memoir?

Can you walk me briefly through your teaching of memoir?

How do you define academic writing?

What must your students do or have in their essays to have a passing grade?

What do you believe students connect or associate memoir with?

If memoir is as important as it seems you believe it is, should it be the first essay taught in the course?

In 3 adjectives, can you capture the essence of what your students' memoirs should be like?

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