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CETL Final Project

Composition instructors have two basic choices at the beginning of the class. They can assign a sort of autobiographical essay that helps students ease into the life of academic writing college professors expect. Or teachers can jump right into the material students analyze comprehensively, assuming immersion is the best method. Neither choice is fool-proof; both have drawbacks as well as benefits. A professor who is focused on students' personal growth, change and maturity might choose to assign a narrative. A composition teacher who is invested in students *as they are*, in the present, might opt for the autobiography. An instructor who desires to see how students have personally invested themselves into their own writing might want to assign a personal narrative as the first step.

Theorists have started discussing the issue of how to get students personally involved in writing since students of all backgrounds began to be admitted into colleges across the country. Many instructors began assigning personal narratives during the 1960s as a bridge between high school and college. The assignments were bland, however; students were required to write simple papers describing summer holidays or favorite vacation destinations. After instructors collected these papers, the courses were quickly moved into more academic spheres with no backward glance at the students' personal lives. As a response to this method of teaching personal writing that seemed to have no purpose, teachers began to completely disregard the narrative as a choice for their classrooms. The trend soon became strictly academic and theoretical, even for freshmen. Teachers were pressured to get rid of the emotional and focus their attention on

academic studies that most students need to succeed in college. Now, however, there has been a shift back toward the 1960s-type mentality that autobiographies might be useful. Theorists have begun to see how focusing freshmen onto particular topics of personal interest may have positive effects on writing throughout their college careers. This comes as no surprise to modern composition professors, as well as others in various fields of study, who realize some students come to college already carrying all kinds of baggage. Teachers of composition hold unique positions for allowing students to express themselves in personal ways through writing.

Professors in a wide variety of disciplines should be encouraged to use personal writing in their classrooms. Areas of study that rely on storytelling include Anthropology (collect and analyze stories of tribal peoples to decipher the values and beliefs of their cultures), Psychology (piece together fragments of an individual's personal history from stories reported in sessions), Biology (try to make sense of diversity of species by weaving dates of fossil remains into stories of evolution), Epidemiology (trace the story and history of disease), and Astrophysics (draw everything they know about the cosmos together into a story that will explain the nature of all matter and the beginning of the universe). People tell stories all the time; we are constantly relating bits of our lives to each other. When students realize that these stories make up who they are and direct where they're going, they might be more willing to see their own connections to the subject matter.

Professors should encourage their students at the beginning of the class experience to write narratives detailing their own history of the subject. For instance, in a math class, students could explain one instance in their lives when they felt either

elevated or looked down upon because of a classroom experience relating to math. Depending on the extensiveness of the project, professors could expand the activity to include a timeline of the students' earliest experiences with math up until enrolling in this particular class. Reading the narratives will enable the professors to understand the diverse backgrounds of their students and, possibly, help them to tailor their classes to the particular needs of the class. Writing the narratives will allow students the chance to express their own misgivings about the college-level class and to feel their individual voices are being heard.

Instructors who have chosen to invest themselves in their students lives can see how the writing of personal narratives is beneficial not only to the students and professors of a specific class but also how what they already know contributes to the overall understanding of the subject material. The connections made are more likely to enhance the classroom experience for all involved.