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by

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Upper Montclair, NJ

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Introduction

Dan Morgan begins his article “Ethical Issues Raised by Students’ Personal Narratives” with an anecdote of his own. He tells the story of a student who confessed to a cold-blooded murder in a personal narrative for his class. Morgan was stunned, and was at a loss at how to deal with this student’s confession. He did not know whether he should report the incident to the authorities. For that matter, he did not know if he should even take the confession seriously. However, it was obvious through Morgan’s narrative that his anxiety over the issue was consuming. He spoke to the student to set up one-on-one meetings, but soon the student stopped showing up to class altogether. The issue of whether the confession was real or not was never resolved. (318-19)

Morgan’s story is disturbing, and perhaps what is most troubling about it is that there really seems to be no definitive answer as to how he should have dealt with this situation. If he had reported this student to the police, what would have happened? Would he have put himself at risk for retribution from this student? If the student had continued to attend Morgan’s classes, would he have really helped him become a better writer, or would Morgan always be hindered by what he suspected of his student?

While Morgan’s story is extreme, and unlikely to happen to most teachers, the feelings of anxiety, fear, discomfort, and even confusion that he experiences as he deals with knowing about a student’s difficult personal experience is certainly valid, and most likely, a common concern for other teachers.
There are several other instances where educators have written about their uneasy feelings about the personal narrative writing assignment. In his book *Risky Writing: Self-Disclosure and Self-Transformation in the Classroom*, Jeffery Berman gives several instances of his unease with certain matters his students chose to divulge in their personal narratives. Berman begins his book with a story about a student who wrote a personal narrative about being sexually abused as a child. She then discloses this information to her classmates. This incident in Berman’s class led to several questions on his part. He asks:

Will writing help her come to terms with a distressing childhood experience or retraumatize her? If writing about certain topics is hazardous, might reading about these topics also prove dangerous, overwhelming the reader with sadness? Should students be allowed to write on risky topics, and if so, how should teachers respond? Might teachers themselves become at risk, unprepared for the emotional, legal, ethical, and pedagogical consequences of their students’ self-disclosures? Are there ways to minimize the risks and maximize the benefits of personal writing? (1)

These are all legitimate questions. Why would this student want to subject herself to this kind of scrutiny? Why would this student want to expose herself? Just as importantly, why did Berman require an assignment which could lead to too much self-exposure?

Lad Tobin also expresses concern about his reaction to some of his students’ personal writings in his book *Writing Relationships: What Really Happens in the*
Composition Class. During one of Tobin’s classes, a student, whom he calls Steve, asked if he could write about a dispute that occurred at the shipbuilding yard he had worked at during the summer in lieu of a conventional research paper. Tobin, who was impressed with Steve’s initiative to try something new, gave his permission.

When Tobin asked for volunteers to read their introductions to the rest of the class, Steve wanted to participate. The introduction appeared to be a very strong commentary about a clash between several different economic classes. Tobin was so impressed with Steve’s writing that he encouraged him to read more to the class. However as Steve shared more of his essay with the class, Tobin lost his enthusiasm for the piece. At one point in the essay, Steve had decided to step back from a completely factual story, and instead created two characters to tell the rest of his story: a young black boy who witnessed the feud and recorded it in his journal and a Jewish reporter from the “Big City” who was in town to write an article on the story. Tobin immediately became aware of racism and anti-Semitism in the depictions of the two characters. However, Tobin was at a loss as to how to react.

Clearly something was wrong here but I wasn’t quite sure how to respond. I was angry and I was hurt and I was extremely surprised. I did not think my responses to Steve or his reading had been insensitive or mean, but apparently our relationship was more complicated and more loaded than I realized. Caught off guard, I wasn’t sure if I should be objecting first to (what I took to be) his racism, his anti-Semitism, or his personal attack on me. I wasn’t even sure if I should be objecting in front of the other
students. (11)

When Steve finished reading his narrative to the class, Tobin found that many of the students were not only impressed with Steve’s writing skills, but genuinely enjoyed the story as well. This troubled him, and Tobin reacted by pointing out that he was not comfortable with the depictions of the boy and the journalist. When he asked Steve to join him for a private conference outside the classroom, he hoped to defuse the situation. Instead Tobin and Steve both seemed to shut down. At that point, Tobin realized that he truly was not prepared to deal with this type of conflict.

I thought about how all the things I needed to know right then I never learned in kindergarten, in graduate school for that matter. I didn’t remember Strunk and White’s dealing with any of this and a Flower and Hayes protocol analysis seemed out of the question. I glanced at him; he was looking away. His expression was halfway between nervousness and hate. When he finally glanced at my face, I’m sure he saw the same thing. (14)

Tobin’s relationship with Steve was certainly complicated by what he learned about Steve through his personal narrative. This story is unsettling because it seems like it could be something that could happen to any teacher when confronted with a student’s personal narrative.

These stories from Morgan, Berman, and Tobin are all indicative of some of the ethical and practical questions that have been arising in recent years over the use of
personal narratives in the classroom. Morgan’s anxiety stems from his concern with how to handle questionable material revealed in personal narratives—material which caused him to rethink what he should ask his students to reveal about themselves. Berman is concerned with the possible psychological damage which could occur from a student’s account of a traumatic event. Tobin becomes uncomfortable when a student exhibits racist and anti-Semitic sentiments which change how Tobin views not only the student’s writing, but also his relationship with this student. While it is likely that students reveal personal prejudices and biases in critical essays, the teacher would possibly be able to address these issues differently than with a personal piece. Since a critical essay depends on outside sources to support a belief, a teacher can direct the student to also look at other sources. When these prejudices are revealed in a personal narrative that depends on the student’s beliefs or experiences, it may become more difficult to address these issues.

However different their initial concerns about the personal narrative writing assignment may be, what is common about all three educators’ stories is their focus on how they were impacted by what their students revealed to them. Although Morgan, Berman, and Tobin were concerned with how their students were affected by writing personal narratives, their stories primarily reflected how they felt about reading traumatic student narratives as teachers. They made assumptions about how their students dealt with these assignments, but they did not definitively know how their students really felt.

While these teachers’ concerns over the use of the personal narrative writing assignment in the classroom are important to the discussion of its ethical implications, there appears to be a major gap in the conversation. The students’ perspectives of the
usefulness of the personal narrative, as well as their emotional and psychological response to its supposed cathartic properties have been largely unexplored.

This thesis intends to take that gap into account. What appear to be missing are the students' views of their experiences with personal narrative writing assignments and how this genre affects their development as academic writers. Do students notice a difference in their ability to write college level essays after writing personal narratives? Do students believe they are positively or negatively affected by disclosing personal information to an authority figure?

These two questions are the basis of my qualitative research study. By analyzing data compiled from a two part survey administered to 100 student participants from a freshman writing course, I will attempt to construct a response to the concerns of ethicality and usefulness in the personal narrative writing assignment. Before I move into an explanation of my methodology, as well as an analysis of the data gathered from the surveys, I believe it is necessary to provide a literature review highlighting some of the most prominent advocates and critics of the personal narrative writing assignment. By honing in on some key points discussed by these scholars, I intend to provide a well-rounded overview of the conversation regarding the personal narrative writing assignment. The discussion that is established in the literature review will be used as a springboard to consider the data compiled from the student participants. Are the concerns articulated by scholars about personal narratives similar to those of the students who write them? If not, what are students saying about personal narratives?
In the past few decades there have been many scholars who have argued for the inclusion of the personal narrative in the classroom. These scholars, many of whom are also teachers who use the personal narrative writing assignment in their own classrooms, cite several different reasons for personal narratives being useful. Much of what has been said revolves around the concept of personal narratives allowing students to be authorities on subjects they know well—their own lives, experiences, and feelings.

Peter Elbow’s essay “Being a Writer vs. Being an Academic: A Conflict in Goals,” focuses on issues of authority that tend to arise for students in a college freshmen writing course. Elbow’s main purpose in this article is to provoke his audience into questioning what it means to be an academic and what it means to be a writer. Elbow wants his students to see themselves as writers. He believes if his students see themselves as writers, they will then see the importance of writing—they will gain a greater understanding of what can be accomplished through writing. Because of this, he wants them to relate more to the role of the writer, to trust themselves as authorities on a subject. Further, he argues against the belief that writing about the self encourages solipsism. Rather, he argues that if students are invested in what they are saying, they will be more interested in what others have to say as well. Instead of becoming completely self-absorbed in their views, they will seek out other perspectives.

Elbow’s primary argument for using personal narratives in the classroom stems from his desire for students to believe they are authorities. He states:
I think autobiography is often the best mode of analysis. I'm afraid that I invite first year students to fall into the following sins: to take their own ideas too seriously; to think that they are the first person to think of their idea and be all wrapped up and possessive about it—I invite them to write as though they are a central speaker at the center of the universe—rather than feeling, as they often do, that they must summarize what others have said and only make modest rejoinders from the edge of the conversation to all the smart thoughts that have already been written. (80)

Elbow's claim that "autobiography is often the best mode of analysis" (80) highlights why he believes personal narratives are important to the development of the writer and the academic. Instead of having his students looking just for "experts" to cite to support and/or make an argument, he is suggesting that students should be able to use their own experiences and beliefs as evidence in discussions.

However, as Elbow acknowledges, too much emphasis on this concept could become problematic for some students because they may be inclined to grasp onto this idea of authority so strongly, that they do not realize there are many other "authorities" among their peers.

This idea of making students the "central speaker at the center of the universe" is one idea which many other advocates of the personal narrative writing assignment support. In The Performance of Self in Student Writing, Thomas Newkirk bases his argument for including personal writing assignments in the classroom on the belief that students can better understand the power of writing by writing about things that are
personally important to them. To further this argument, Newkirk provides a list of ideals he finds to be “empowering” for students who write personal stories.

It is empowering for students—for all of us—to believe: that we can imagine ourselves as coherent selves with coherent histories and can therefore create stories about ourselves; that this coherence, this “identity,” allows for a sense of agency, a trajectory into the future; that we each see the world in a distinctive way and have the ability to make a distinctive contribution to it; that human beings share an essence that allows the “I” of the writers to become a mirror for us all; that knowing entails feeling, and that discourse becomes sterile if it shuts out emotion; that openness to the particularity of the natural world, what Lawrence Buell calls an “environmental imagination” serves as a check to human egotism and can create a sense of stewardship. (98)

What is truly empowering about the personal narrative is that students are able to tell their own stories, as if these stories are just as important as the ones they read in every class they have ever been in. Their stories are not only relevant to what is happening in the world, but also unique—they can see themselves as individuals and members of the same community simultaneously.

For both Elbow and Newkirk, believing that students will become selfish or completely self-absorbed by being allowed to write about their own experiences and opinions is not only faulty, but somewhat dangerous as well. A complete emphasis on students’ opinions can be problematic, but their arguments highlight a valid point. It may
be that too much focus on students' experiences is risky because they may become too
invested, and possibly, inflexible in their views. Yet if there is too little emphasis on how
students relate to the world around them, it can lead them to dismiss their own
experiences as not as valuable as those of scholars and "experts."

Candace Spigelman considers the power of the personal narrative for students in
her essay "Argument and Evidence in the Case of the Personal," yet she points out that it
is not the personal narrative form which is difficult, but rather how it is typically read and
discussed. Spigelman acknowledges that personal narratives can be a cause for concern
when they are left unchallenged by those who do not wish to disturb another person's
view. However, her call for personal narratives to be viewed as "serious research," (83)
demonstrates the true purpose of her essay and furthers her argument in favor for the use
of personal narratives as legitimate pieces of scholarship.

I would argue that the telling of stories can actually serve the same
purposes as academic writing and that narratives of personal experience
can accomplish serious scholarly work. I want to move beyond the notion
of the personal as supplement to advance the position that narrative, in its
various forms, is a logical and legitimate mode of argument appropriate to
the academic writing of both composition scholars and their students.
Indeed, stories and examples have always been woven into successful
arguments, oftentimes so seamlessly that readers do not even mark them.
(64)
From Spigelman’s claims, it seems plausible to also suspect that many critical pieces are written because the writer has a relationship to the topic—some personal investment in the argument that is being made. If this is the case, then it can be argued that many scholarly, credible works come from a place similar to that of the personal narrative.

Elbow, Newkirk, and Spigelman are all attempting to show the value of personal narratives within the academic world. The arguments made for the inclusion of the personal narrative in the writing classroom stem from the beliefs that personal narrative assignments can act as a springboard for the analysis of the self and others, and that it is also a legitimate and reasonable way to come to and create knowledge.

When Richard Miller considers personal narrative writing assignments, he asks if they can be used to promote difficult discussions among students and teachers. In his essay, “Fault Lines in the Contact Zones,” Miller discusses how many of his colleagues at a conference were unsettled when confronted with a student essay titled “Queers, Bums, and Magic.” While there were suggestions as how to deal with such a piece in a writing classroom, Miller believes using the essay to rouse discussion in class is the most useful. He suggests that troubling personal narratives, such as “Queers, Bums, and Magic,” could be used to open discussions about controversial topics such as hate crimes, violence, homophobia, etc.

Miller’s suggestion is interesting, yet it also seems very controversial in regards to a student’s privacy. While turning a student’s essay into a “teachable object” (395) might help some students better understand certain issues, in this case homophobia and racism, it is also very possible that this method might have the opposite effect. Will students,
especially those who have become “teachable objects,” become defensive about their views if they are feeling attacked by their teacher and their peers? If so, can growth really come from this type of situation?

There are others who also ascribe to the “teachable object” method, although perhaps not as fully as Miller. David Schaafsma’s essay “Things We Cannot Say: “Writing for Your Life” and Stories in English Education” focuses primarily on the cathartic value of having students write personal narratives for class. Schaafsma believes that because “silence” and “being silenced” are serious issues plaguing children in schools, students should be encouraged to explore their personal experiences through writing. Schaafsma spends a great deal of time explaining how his own class is set up to allow students to tell their stories. It is of the utmost importance to Schaafsma for his students to believe that they are heard and understood. While he does admit that many stories are difficult to tell, he suggests that those stories may become easier to bear if they are exposed (110).

Judith Harris also cites the potential psychological benefits of personal writing as a reason to use it in the classroom. Focusing on the tenets of psychoanalytic pedagogy, she writes:

> Psychoanalysis helps us see that there are always unconscious factors perambulating just under the surface of a writer’s discourse and that we are all vulnerable to them: they are our Achilles heel or Delilah with a pair of scissors. Most importantly, psychoanalytic pedagogy supports the idea that writing can be therapeutic and, therefore, more meaningful for
the student in the long term than other socio-epistemic pedagogies
developed for undergraduate writing courses. Psychoanalytic pedagogy
shows the benefits of personal writing as linked to improvements in
both writing and social consciousness. (181)

By linking psychoanalysis and writing, Harris is arguing that there are many influences
shaping an individual’s writing. According to Harris, writing, especially personal writing
is so beneficial to students because it allows them to work through problems, concerns,
and issues. The psychoanalytic approach to reading and/or understanding personal
narratives could possibly lead to students becoming more aware of what was once
“unconscious.” While this is an interesting concept, I wonder just how many students are
truly willing to read so deeply into their writing, and just how well-equipped teachers are
to handle psychoanalyzing their students’ stories.

It might seem troubling to some teachers to take this type of approach to reading
and using personal narrative assignments. Lad Tobin, however, believes that it is because
some personal narratives are so troubling that they should be assigned. In his essay “Car
Wrecks, Baseball Caps, and Man-to-Man Defense: The Personal Narratives of
Adolescent Males,” Tobin sheds a light on the difficulty some teachers have dealing with
young male students’ personal narratives, which he claims are usually “narratives which
focus in clichéd language on acts of machismo” (160). On the matter of disturbing
personal narratives, Tobin states:

That so many of those narratives are so troubling should not surprise us or
tempt us to respond to censure and self-righteousness. But even more
important, the fact that so many of these narratives are so unsettling to our students and ourselves should not be used to support the argument that autobiographical writing should be kept out of the curriculum. In fact, the opposite point could be made: since it is so often the central site of conflict, confession, and catharsis, the personal narrative gives us a unique opportunity to help students negotiate the borderlands between home and school, past and present, self and other. (168)

Tobin’s argument is very similar to Miller’s because he believes teachers should not shy away from personal narratives, even if they can be difficult to handle. In fact, Tobin uses an example of a student who he believes came to a better understanding of himself after he questioned him about certain aspects of what Tobin considered a typical, adolescent male narrative. This student, who Tobin refers to as Tim, seemed to embody every adolescent male stereotype possible. The first personal narrative that Tim wrote for Tobin was about his shoplifting “hobby” and how he continuously taunted the manager of the store he stole from. Tobin was disgusted with this display of “machismo.” Although he came to realize that there were deeper meanings to Tim’s narrative, and that he had read his own negative perceptions about Tim into the essay, Tobin still favored the last narrative that Tobin wrote for his class—a narrative which centered on the troubled relationship Tim had with his father (173-75).

It is interesting that while Tobin sees the narrative about shoplifting to be “typical,” he does not seem to think that the same can be said for the narrative that was written about Tim’s relationship with his father. He claims that this story is in fact more
genuine. However, it can be argued that the story of a tumultuous father-son relationship is just as typical of the male experience as the story about shoplifting. Both are about issues with authority, which Tobin acknowledges, yet it does not seem that he truly recognizes that he is privileging the authenticity of one narrative over the other based on the amount of sensitivity in each.

What is prevalent throughout all of these scholars’ works is a sense that they must defend the legitimacy of personal narrative writing assignments and personal experiences in general. This appears to be a response to criticism, which Elbow, Newkirk, and Spigelman address, that personal writing leads students to be “indulgent” and “isolated” from others’ experiences. All of these scholars point to the sharing of students’ personal stories as eye opening experiences which allows students to see commonalities amidst their varied experiences.

While their arguments are strong, and quite persuasive, the advocates of personal narrative writing assignments do not completely agree on whether or not the classroom is the appropriate outlet for students to reveal their personal experiences to their peers. While Elbow, Miller, and Tobin would definitely argue that it is, Schaafsma is not completely sure. In his essay, Schaafsma tells a story about his own classroom, and how one of his students, Sue, became distraught over constantly hearing the emotionally upsetting and draining personal stories of fellow classmates. The class discussed this issue, and decided to put restrictions on how the stories were told in class. By the end of the semester, some students were very resentful because they felt “silenced” by Sue’s
discomfort with the class. What was once a place to reveal their stories became a place where they had to place limits on what they could say. (113-14)

Schaafsma has no real solution to this problem. As he says toward the end of his essay, “But is the classroom a place to create the possibility for them [personal stories] to be shared? I would say, it depends” (115). This is a valid question, one which troubles many of the critics of the personal narrative writing assignment. Would it have been better if Schaafsma’s students had never shared their personal narratives to begin with? Perhaps they felt so limited by Sue’s declaration of discomfort because they believed all of their stories and experiences would be accepted by their peers, which was obviously not the case. Universal acceptance of an experience is something that no instructor can guarantee.
Critics

There are several different factors to consider in light of the critiques of personal narrative assignments. The focus of this criticism tends to appear in one or more of three primary categories: evaluative concerns, ethical concerns, and concerns over academic merit. These three concerns can be difficult to separate as they seem to influence one another in many scholars’ works, however for the purpose of this thesis, it is useful to focus on each aspect’s distinctive values.

To discuss the matter of evaluation and its problematic nature in regards to personal narrative writing assignments, it is important first to understand that certain characteristics are expected from personal narratives. While many advocates argue that personal narratives allow for more creativity and freedom in writing, there are some prominent scholars who question this assertion.

David Bartholomae can be cited as one of these critics. In his essay “Writing with Teachers: A Conversation with Peter Elbow,” Bartholomae addresses the idea that there is a difference between academic writing and personal or creative writing. While Elbow believes that personal writing can lead to better critical, or academic writing, because there is more room for freedom and discovery, Bartholomae suggests that personal writing is just as bound to academic expectations because it is still seen as part of a genre. Bartholomae essentially raises questions of what instructors expect from their students’ personal narratives. This calls into question the issue of the authenticity of the experience. For students to make their personal narrative more “unique” they would
then have to provide more intimate, personal details. As Bartholomae asked in his article:

Should we teach new journalism or creative non-fiction as part of the required undergraduate curriculum? That is, should all students be required to participate in a first person, narrative or expressive genre whose goal it is to reproduce the ideology of sentimental realism—where a world is made in the image of a single, authorizing point of view? A narrative that celebrates a world made up of the details of private life and whose hero is sincere? (69)

Bartholomae’s concern over students being made to reveal, or rather, expose their personal experiences to meet the criteria of the personal narrative is perhaps the crux of the problem of evaluating personal narrative writing assignments. It seems that he is suggesting that a student’s personal narrative will always be judged based on what a teacher believes is a feasible, or credible story.

This concern over evaluation, and what it means to evaluate personal narrative writing assignments is also raised in Jeffrey Berman’s book Risky Writing: Self-Disclosure and Self-Transformation in the Classroom. While Berman cannot necessarily be fully defined as a “critic” of personal narratives in the classroom, since he spends a great deal of his book discussing how if can be effectively implemented, he does bring up potential problems in grading personal narrative assignments.

For Berman, grading personal narratives is fraught enough with problems so as to be worth avoiding entirely: he gives pass/fail grades. Berman also provides other
options for teachers, which includes allowing students to pick alternative assignments to supplement those they do not feel comfortable with, and giving students the option to be anonymous writers. In regards to grading, Berman cites an example from his own experience:

Most of the writing courses in my department are graded pass/fail, which minimizes the possibility that students will feel that they must be self-disclosing in order to receive a good grade. Teachers should never grade a student essay on the degree of its self-disclosure...Freedom from a letter grade encourages students to be more candid and forthright than they might otherwise be, thus making possible voluntary self-disclosure. (41)

Berman's acknowledgement that students may feel the need to disclose more personal information than they might be comfortable with to achieve a higher grade highlights the very real problem that students might be faced with. The concern that students will give a particular "performance" for a grade or teacher and/or peer approval is something which also factors into the academic merit aspect of personal narratives.

However aware Berman might be about the issues of evaluating personal narratives, his point regarding the absence of letter grades as a means of getting students to be "more candid and forthright than they might otherwise be (41),” leads into another factor discussed by other critics of personal narrative writing assignments—the actual ethical issues that arise from exposing and being exposed to students' personal experiences.
For the purpose of this argument, ethical concerns will refer to issues that focus primarily on an imbalance of power within the framework of the student-teacher relationship. These are issues which are related to some educators’ use of personal narratives to psychoanalyze and “diagnose” students, as well as biases which may arise due to differences in gender and ethnicity.

Susan Swartzlander, Diana Pace, and Virginia Lee Stamler’s short yet provocative opinion piece, “The Ethics of Requiring Students to Write about Their Personal Lives,” discusses several problems that arise when students are asked to reveal themselves through personal writing assignments. One of these concerns deals with students trying to negotiate how much they need to reveal about their experiences in personal assignments. They question whether

Students are able to make judgments about how much to reveal and to whom. For example, students who have been sexually abused often have difficulty understanding appropriate limits in relationships, stemming from the fact that childhood sexual abuse involves a transgression of appropriate boundaries. Such students might respond to a writing assignment by making themselves completely vulnerable or else being extremely distant. Because knowing what to say and how to say it is so difficult with them, dealing with these issues while trying to complete an assignment can be overwhelming. Writing about childhood experiences could cause strong feelings of shame to surface; having others read about their experiences could cause additional trauma. (B1)
The authors' focus on the issue of sexual abuse as risky writing material is indicative of how unsettling and disturbing these types of personal narratives are, even if they are not necessarily commonplace. The authors' question of whether the classroom is truly the place for this type of exposure points to the problem of teachers, as authority figures, asking students to talk about deeply personal, and often, deeply traumatic issues. As stated at the end of the text,

Our students deserve the respect and dignity we afford other adults. They need to be able to work on their own psychological issues in their own time and ways. We should be in the business of encouraging emotional development—not mandating it. (B2)

Along with the concerns over students feeling as if they are being forced to confide in educators, who then act as amateur counselors, Swartzlander, Pace, and Stamler also argue that writing about personal experiences tends to affect female students more negatively than males: “When the boundaries between professional and personal are blurred by turning personal revelation into course content, paternalism may thrive in the guise of professional guidance when the professor is male and the student female” (B1). The issue here then revolves around a sense of inequality which transcends just the student/teacher relationship. The authors are calling into question the practice of using women’s writing, especially traumatic women’s writing, as class material. They argue that this sense of female disempowerment and victimization may be heightened when the educator requiring this type of traumatic exposure is male.
This is a thoughtful argument, but I question whether the risk of victimization for women really is greater than it is for other students—for example, students who are of a "lower" economic class than their teachers or those who are of a different ethnicity or culture than their peers. The focus on women is important, of course, but I think there are already so many different markers of power disparities between students and professors, that the risk might be just as high for all students, but perhaps in different ways.

The question of whether the classroom is truly the place for student personal narratives arises for other educators as well. Dan Morgan considers how personal narratives can pose difficult ethical questions for teachers concerning their students. His story about a student’s murder confession within a personal narrative led him to wonder if any educator really has any right to know about a student’s personal life. Focusing primarily on confessions of crime he asks:

Is it part of the teacher’s role to act as detective in such cases? Get a fuller, usable confession? Then shouldn’t teachers also report to the authorities students who relate personal involvement in lesser crime or illegal activities, from vandalism and drug dealing to underage drinking or passing bad checks?...The teacher must make the determination whether a crime is serious enough to make it reportable? Moreover, are student essays always in the public domain? (319)

Morgan’s questions are significant because he acknowledges that the personal narrative writing assignment has the power to change the dynamic of the student-teacher relationship. When personal narratives are a part of the writing classroom, does the
teacher’s role change? According to Morgan, the teacher may have to become a
detective, a therapist, a judge, etc. In cases such as this, the student’s text may become
evidence of any type of problem such as abuse, criminality, deviance, and/or mental
instability. When Morgan asks whether student essays are in the public domain, he is
also questioning who has the right to a student’s text. If a troubling personal narrative is
written for an assignment, does the teacher automatically have free reign to judge it as
they choose?

Morgan poses the reader with another set of questions based on a poorly written
essay by one of his students that focused on being in an abusive relationship. He asks his
audience to really consider the difficulties teachers face when confronted with troubling
personal narratives. Essentially, what role is he supposed to play? He asks:

As a teacher, how do I negotiate my written responses? To address
writing issues seems cold, and frankly, even irrelevant at a certain level.
And I have some misgivings about the ethical appropriateness of issuing
an unsolicited referral to counseling. So, to paraphrase Miller, do I work
to help this student write a better paper about how a person should
continue staying in a relationship with an abusive crack addict?...Is it
appropriate for an English teacher to nudge a student toward rethinking
the traumas of her life? Or should the teacher focus on writing issues
such as paragraph unity and sentence structure—issues this writer
certainly needed to address? (120)
Morgan's question of whether he, as an English teacher, has the right to ask a student to delve more deeply into a personal trauma for the main purpose of making a paper "better" is critical, because it seems it is within this dilemma where the true risk for students may lie; they may see their personal experiences trivialized by being treated as "assignments."

In "Revealing Silence: Rethinking Personal Writing," Anne Ruggles Gere considers how silence factors into students' personal narratives. Ruggles Gere divides personal narrative into three schools of thought—expressivist, psychoanalytical, and social, and acknowledges that while these three have some slight differences in purpose, "all of these discourses of personal writing privilege articulation over withholding, fluency over reticence" (206). She furthers this argument with a brief breakdown of what these perspectives favor about fluidity:

All three implicity position speech/writing as "truth" and oppose it to the "lie" of silence. The expressivist's call for voice, the psychoanalytic's for multiplicity of meaning, and the social's for collaboration and identification of membership each prize the breaking of silence to bring forth authentic expression. Each positions silence as speech's opposite and urges that it be broken or overcome. (206)

According to Ruggles Gere, the ethical concern which accompanies this need to "break" or "overcome" silence, sometimes leads to a different yet equally destructive form of silence. She labels this type of silence as "inarticulateness." Echoing the concerns of Swartzlander, Pace, and Stamler, Ruggles Gere argues:
Inarticulateness is a silence students may experience in classrooms where they feel unable to produce personal writing that fits the canonical narratives prized there. Personal writing introduces a leveling force into the classroom—after all, everyone has a life to narrate—but it sometimes accords higher prestige to certain narratives. Students can quickly begin to feel that they haven’t had the right experiences, haven’t had the right lives, to produce writing that will be highly valued by their teachers.

(206-7)

If students are truly aware that certain life experiences are valued more than others by their educators, what good can possibly come from writing about an experience which certainly doesn’t measure up to the poignant nature of a narrative about a traumatic event? Ruggles Gere furthers her critique when she claims:

In a classroom that privileges personal writing, the story of a rape may carry a great deal more cultural capital than one about babysitting a younger brother. Students who describe themselves as victims of a comfortable home, as lacking a politically correct ethnicity and culture, or as having boring lives often express dismay at not having the right kind of story to tell. Those new to the academy and inexperienced as writers can fall into an inarticulate silence because they feel that their life experiences have not given them access to narratives that will please their teacher readers. The corrosive effects of this inarticulate silence help to explain why silence has such a bad name. (207)
The “victim” aspect of Ruggles Gere’s argument highlights several ethical concerns. These “inexperienced” writers, who find their lives “boring” in comparison to another student who may have suffered abuse or other hardships, may begin to see their own lives as less valuable, and believe they have nothing to say. However, this aspect of victimization also extends to those students who have revealed traumatic experiences of their lives. If their life altering experiences are labeled as “powerful” or “moving” by educators, are their hardships then glamorized to their peers who have been fortunate enough not to encounter these problems? Consequently, do these students run the risk of having their lives reduced to nothing more than a “poignant” story?

Ruggles Gere’s article raises other questions as well. One of her earlier claims factors into another concern critics share over the use of personal narratives in the classroom—determining its academic merit. The academic merit of the personal narrative is something which has been argued for and against by many scholars, however, it has almost always been discussed in terms of how personal writing can lead to a greater realization of the self and the factors which shape an individual’s existence. It then becomes a matter of whether this realization helps student writers to be better able to analyze subjects other than their own lives and experiences. It is also possible to consider the academic merit of personal writing in more specific terms. If the assumption is that personal writing can lead to self-revelations and a greater understanding of a person’s position in the world, then the focus turns to whether personal narrative really fulfills its promise and purpose for students.
According to Ruggles Gere, further complications surrounding personal narrative writing assignments may arise from students falsifying information.

When they [students] are astute enough to discern the types of narratives that receive special praise in composition classes, some students create fictional accounts that fit the contours of such narratives. The student who has never been involved in so much as a fist fight will “invent” a narrative about being savagely beaten or the student with limited sexual experience will recount a rape. Such “personal” experiences become commodities that can be exchanged for good grades in classrooms where the instructor’s colonizing impulses frame personal writing in relatively narrow terms. (217)

Ruggles Gere’s concern seems to have much to do with students believing they must provide a performance to either achieve a certain grade or classroom acceptance. As many advocates have argued, personal narratives can allow students to discover more about themselves and how their lives have been shaped by their experiences. However, if students feel compelled to “invent” experiences in hopes of getting a better grade for their “performance,” then it seems plausible that the purpose of the personal narrative writing assignment is then rendered null and void. Essentially, if the point of the personal narrative, or what has become the personal narrative, is self-realization and analysis, this competition to have the more “moving” personal story can lead to students completely missing out on the entire intent of the personal writing experience.
Beyond this concern, there are also other aspects in the consideration of personal narrative’s academic merit. In the article, “Who Says So? Ownership, Authorship, and Privacy in Process Writing Classrooms,” Karyn E. Schweiker-Marra, Mary Broglie, and Elizabeth Plumer discuss situations that occurred in their own classrooms which led them to question certain aspects of process writing in relation to the ideals of the expressivist movement. Mary Broglie’s section, titled “Privacy Issues Regarding Peer-Revision Workshops,” specifically focuses on concerns she had about students sharing personal narratives in peer workshops. After assigning personal literacy histories to her students, she decided to write her own to share with the group. As she read her literacy history to her class, she realized just how much about herself she was sharing with them. All of a sudden she became aware of how her class status, ethnicity, and family history had shaped her literacy, and by sharing this information with her class, she was also exposing personal aspects of her life that she was not entirely comfortable with. Broglie came to several realizations about personal narratives in peer groups at this point. One of these realizations was the understanding that not every writer is willing to share his or herself with a group.

If, as a writer, I want my writing to be meaningful, to be genuine, I must follow wherever it leads. That, however, doesn’t necessarily mean that I always want to invite other people to travel along. Shouldn’t I, as a conscientious teacher, also extend the same consideration to my students?

(20)
Considering how important methods like peer revision and group workshops have become within the writing classroom, it is reasonable to believe that Broglie’s concern is not only valid but practical.¹

If peer revision and workshops are indeed integral aspects of the writing process, the obstacles raised by the use of personal narrative writing assignments appears to present more drawbacks than possible moments for improvement for student writers. This seems to be more than enough of a reason to reconsider the academic benefits of the personal narrative writing assignment.

¹ Broglie notes that the issue of privacy is a critical one within the public school system. She cites several laws such as The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act and the Hatch Amendment (21) as examples of how seriously school administrators, educators, and parents alike consider the issue of student and family privacy. The legal implications of having students share personal information included in personal narratives are enough in themselves in leading writing teachers to re-evaluate the use of personal writing in peer revision and workshop settings.
**Similarities, Differences, and Things Left to Consider**

What seems to be common among both advocates and critics of the personal narrative writing assignment is the deeply rooted conviction to do what is the most sensitive to and respectful of the students’ needs. From the scholars discussed, it seems that advocates for personal narratives want students to know that their lives and experiences are valuable and meaningful. More than that, they genuinely want students to be able to make connections between their own experiences and beliefs and those of their peers and the world at large.

Critics of personal narrative writing assignments are generally concerned about students’ privacy in one form or another. There is a definite acknowledgement by most critics that personal narratives can lead to meaningful discoveries, yet there is also the question of whether the classroom is really the place for them. Considering the power dynamics of the student/teacher relationship, critics wonder if students could be intentionally or unintentionally coerced into revealing themselves to the point of exposure.

While both sides make valid arguments for their points, what is noticeably missing from the majority of them is the student voice. Even the scholars who take into account actual student experiences for better or worse only provide a very small sample (a handful of students) of their voices. This gap is what my study intends to address.
Methodology

There were several different approaches I could have taken for the qualitative research of this study. When I first considered discussing personal narrative writing assignments and their effects on students’ relationships with writing, I had thought to use a combination of case studies and surveys. However, as I furthered my research of both of these methods, I came to the conclusion that surveys alone would serve me the best for the purpose of this project. There were several key components that factored into this decision.

Primarily, I was concerned with some of the ethical issues raised by the case study approach. In particular I was concerned with choosing people who only supported some of my ideas about personal narrative writing assignments. Originally, I was intent on offering proof about how students were negatively affected by personal narrative assignments, however, I soon came to the realization that by setting out to find those who had negative experiences with personal narratives, I was already determining how my participants’ stories would be interpreted and relayed within this study. This became an issue to me specifically because I was wary of reading my participants’ stories and data only as a means of validating my own beliefs. While it would not be my intention to purposely bend my data to support my hypothesis, the fact that I would have a hypothesis to prove would possibly be enough for me to see proof in my participants’ stories without being observant of the data as a whole entity.

It soon became apparent to me that what I had been trying to do with a small number of case studies was limiting in itself because they are only a very small sample
out of a large population. I decided then to work with questionnaires among a much larger, specific population. According to Lauer and Asher:

> Sampling surveys are a valuable research tool, because they enable the investigator to obtain descriptive information about readily observed or recalled behavior of very large populations...When surveys are used in conjunction with random sampling, investigators can achieve representativeness of large populations. (55)

The specific population I chose to study was drawn from the 1680 students enrolled in the 68 sections of ENWR 106 at Montclair State University during the Spring 2007 semester. These students are in the final class in what is termed “The First Year Writing Sequence.” The vast majority of students in this course are second semester freshmen. All of these students were required to take ENWR 105 at Montclair State University or an equivalent course at another university or college.

This questionnaire (refer to Appendix A) was created with the intent of gauging students’ relationships with personal narratives assigned to them during their ENWR 105 classes. Personal narratives are not required for ENWR 105 classes but they are not so uncommon. My choice to survey 100 students enrolled in ENWR 106 and not ENWR 105 centered mainly on the concept that these students would have an understanding of whether a personal narrative writing assignment improved their ability to write college essays and/or whether this assignment affected their relationship with writing.

The questionnaire consisted of two parts, was two pages long, and was approximately ten-fifteen minutes in length. The questionnaire was comprised of
multiple choice questions, yes or no questions, and short answer questions. The first part established whether or not students were asked to write personal narratives, as well as how the personal narrative was responded to, and how the student felt about the response given to their work. The second part of the questionnaire asked the student to think of the personal narrative assignment in relation to its usefulness in improving their ability to write other college essays, and whether the experience of having a personal narrative as an assignment changed his or her relationship with writing. At several points throughout the questionnaire the student was given space to voice specifics about his or her experience if so desired.

Once my questionnaire was given Internal Review Board (IRB) approval, my advisor and the first year writing program director, Dr. Emily Isaacs, emailed the faculty of all ENWR 106 classes for the Spring 2007 semester describing to them the purpose of my questionnaire and research study, and asking for their permission for me to go to their classes and administer my questionnaire to any willing students. I received responses from seven professors, three of whom were teaching 105 at the time, so I was not able to utilize their classes. The other four professors offered their 106 sections for my study, which resulted in me having seven classes to work with. One professor had one 106 section, while the other three had two 106 classes apiece.

The data collection aspect of the study took place over a span of three days in April, 2007. Questionnaires were distributed in the approved classes on Thursday, April 12th, Friday, April 13th, and Tuesday, April 17th. Three classes a day were surveyed on both Thursday and Friday, while the last class was on the following Tuesday.
Considering that most ENWR 106 sections have a class roll of a maximum of twenty-five students, I originally believed that I would only need six of the seven sections offered to me. However, not enough students volunteered to participate in the study during the final class I attended on Friday, so the professor of that class allowed me to also ask her second section to participate that following Tuesday.

As for the actual process of collecting data via the questionnaire, I followed the same procedure for all of the course sections, with only minor changes for the seventh and final class. For the first six ENWR 106 classes, I arrived approximately ten to fifteen minutes early so that I would have time to confer with the professor and answer any questions he or she may have had. The professor then waited approximately five minutes after the official start time of the class, which allowed students time to get settled in, to introduce me to the class. I was then given time to introduce my study, give a brief explanation of the purpose of my study and thesis, and relate to them the significance of their participation in the questionnaire.

I then gave a more detailed explanation of what the survey process would involve for those who were willing to participate in the study. I asked students who were interested in participating to raise their hands so that I could hand out two copies of the study’s consent form (see Appendix B), one which they would keep and one which I would collect with their signature attesting to the fact that they were willing participants. After handing out two consent forms to each volunteer, I then read the entire consent form out loud and allowed students time to ask me any questions they might have. I also
supplied students with my email address if they wanted to contact me about the study at any later date or time.

I made a concerted effort to make every volunteer aware that all of their responses would be kept completely confidential and that no identifying information, other than their signature on the consent form, would be asked of them. I assured volunteers that only I would be seeing the information they provided to me, and that at no time would their surveys be shared with their professors or any other member of the faculty. All surveys and consent forms would be shredded and disposed of when the study was completed. Each participant was also informed that he or she was not obligated to answer any question he or she was not comfortable with and that he or she had the right to stop participation at any time. After explaining all of this to the student volunteers, I gave them time to read over the forms themselves, and to provide their consent to participate. I asked students to raise their hands when they had completed the consent forms for me to collect from them. At that time I would collect one copy of their consent form, and supply them with the questionnaire. When I collected a consent form, or group of consent forms, I placed them in a folder which was set aside for completed consent forms in an effort to keep with the promise of complete confidentiality.

Participants were told to raise their hands when they had completed their survey. They were also told that they could ask any questions about the survey at any time during their participation. When a student raised his or her hand to inform me of the completion of his or her questionnaire, I collected it, and then placed it in a folder designated solely for completed surveys.
Approximately 65 surveys were completed on Thursday, April 12th, by the first three classes visited. Many of the students in these three classes appeared to be eager, enthusiastic, and exhibited a willingness to help me with the research study.

From the response I received on my first day of surveying students, I expected to be able to have all one hundred surveys completed by Friday afternoon, and I even wondered if I would only need the participation of five total classes instead of six or seven. However, Friday’s participants proved to be far less enthused about participating in the study. In fact, only eight students participated from the last class I surveyed that Friday.

The change in the level of responsiveness I received from the students could be due to a few different factors. For one thing, these other three classes took place on a Friday, which is a typically lower energy day for most college students, Montclair students included. Many students appeared impatient with being in class at all, which could also be due to the rapidly approaching end of the Spring semester. Also, I found myself a little less enthusiastic about collecting data on Friday than I was on Thursday, and it is possible that my own decrease in friendliness might have contributed to students’ somewhat lackluster response. By the time I had completed visiting my scheduled three class for the day, I had seven surveys left and took up the one professor on her offer to survey her other 106 class the following Tuesday.


Expectations

The completed surveys I collected provided me with an interesting insight into the thoughts and opinions of students about personal narratives in the classroom environment. Much of the data I collected surprised me, and many responses posed difficult questions for me as the researcher.

Although I tried not to assume anything about what I would find in the surveys, there were certain things that I admit I expected to see from the collected data. First, I did not expect many students to have written personal narratives for their ENWR 105 classes. While I was aware that some teachers asked their students to write personal narratives for ENWR 105, I expected that this was the exception as opposed to the rule. Of those students who wrote personal narratives, I expected the majority to have enjoyed the assignment because it was easy for them. Personal narratives rarely require any type of research, so it is usually a straightforward assignment. I also expected the students who wrote personal narratives to find them to not be particularly influential on their writing abilities.
Study Summary

Processing all of the multiple choice data received from the completed student surveys was an arduous yet fascinating task. There were many factors I considered in deciding how to categorize the information gathered from students. I eventually decided to focus on the multiple choice and yes/no questions to ascertain information for the study summary and create an “interesting trends” section to discuss the data gathered from the open-ended questions. I believed that by doing this, I could give a more in-depth look on each aspect of the study.²

²The percentages given are based on the 100 students surveyed out of a possible population of 1680. These percentages are then given confidence limits of +/- 8.9% based on a table of confidence interval limits for percentages obtained from Lauer’s and Asher’s guide. As explained by Lauer and Asher,

> The confidence limits are the range of scores or percentages within which a population percentage is likely to be found on variables that describe that population…Sample sizes do not have to be large in proportion to the whole population to have precision. With a population of 6000, for example, a sample size of 240—1/25 of the population size (and 1/25 of the work in describing and analyzing it)—yields information that is about 1/5 as precise as the information from the whole population. (58-59)

Percentages that are given based on a smaller number of participants will follow the respective number provided by this table. Each yes/no or multiple choice question will be used to help break down the information gathered. Bar graphs will be used to display this data. These bar graphs display the actual number of participants who responded to survey questions.
Although Montclair's writing program tends to focus on critical essays as opposed to personal narratives, 90% of the student participants reported that they had been given this type of assignment in ENWR 105. Since I genuinely thought personal narrative assignments were more of an exception to this course, I was surprised by this result.

The 90 students who responded that they had indeed written a personal narrative for an ENWR 105 class can be further separated into four primary categories: those who were very satisfied with the response to their personal narratives, those who were satisfied with the response to their personal narratives, those who were slightly satisfied with the responses they received to their personal narratives, and those who were not satisfied at all to the responses they received.

Although I was surprised to find that so many students reported that they were asked to write a personal narrative for their ENWR 105 class, I was not surprised that the majority of students were satisfied with the responses they received. Of the 90 students
who responded that they had written a personal narrative for an ENWR 105 class, twenty-seven students or 30% answered that they were very satisfied with the response they received to their personal narrative. Approximately 54.44% of the participants were satisfied with the responses they were given. Out of the same 90 students 12.22% responded as being slightly satisfied. Only 2.22% of the population responded as being not satisfied at all with the responses they received for their personal narrative writing assignments.

I believed it was crucial to ask my student participants how they were evaluated, because it seems that one of the most problematic aspects of personal narrative assignments is deciding how to grade or even interact with it. Scholars such as Berman, Bartholomae, and Broglie touched on some of these issues, and I think understanding how students were evaluated, as well as how they dealt with this evaluation provides insight into just how much of an issue it is.
Out of the 90 students who responded as having written a personal narrative in ENWR 105, approximately 84.44% received letter grades. This information made me question the circumstances surrounding the assignment. Was this the first writing assignment given? The last? Was it an assignment given as a break in between two or more difficult assignments? Also I wondered whether there was a certain criteria the students were expected to follow (as David Bartholomae suggests there always is) or whether the students were allowed to be creative with their work.

Thinking about this data also led me to believe that the majority of the students' personal narratives were given good grades—anything within the A and B range. This seems plausible to me because most of the student respondents were either "very satisfied" or "satisfied." I doubt that students would be so pleased with this grading scheme if most of the grades fell into lower ranges. Teacher comments were also used frequently when responding to students' personal narratives. Approximately 76.66% of the students responded as having received this as their grade or as a part of their grade.

I think it is important to note that there was the same amount of students who were only "slightly satisfied" or "not satisfied" with letter grades, as there were for teacher comments. I have to question then whether it was the grade that made the students less satisfied with the responses they received for their personal narratives, or if it was their teachers' comments. This is something that could be asked about more specifically in further surveys about personal narratives.

I find it interesting that so many students also received peer responses for their personal narratives. This is somewhat surprising to me, mainly because I usually
associate peer reviews with the revisions of more critical essays. Approximately 43% of the participants responded as having received peer comments as a response, or part of a response to their personal narratives. When it came to option of a check mark or lower stakes grades as part of their response, 7.77% chose this as the response, or part of the response they received on their personal narrative. I found the infrequent use of check marks and lower stakes grades very surprising. This result was so unexpected, mainly because I did not think so many teachers would give these assignments the same type of weight as other writing assignments. Only 3.33% of students chose the “other” option for this question.

The student participants were asked to choose the emotions which most closely related to how they felt about their personal narrative experience. Since the majority of participants had positive reactions to the responses they received for their personal narratives, it makes sense that the majority of emotions chosen were positive as well. The options were “accepted,” “supported,” “encouraged,” “listened to,” “understood,” “pleased,” “dismissed,” “confused,” “criticized,” “ignored,” “misunderstood,” and “angered.”
I find it interesting that the top three choices among student participants were “accepted,” “encouraged,” and “listened to.” Although I am not surprised that there are more students who had positive feelings than negative feelings due to the high satisfaction rate, I am a bit surprised to find that the majority of students were so invested in their teachers’ (and sometimes their peers’) responses that they valued feeling accepted, encouraged, and listened to over other emotions. While all of the choices were strong feelings, these top three have very strong connections to the importance of the student-teacher relationship.
It is interesting to find that the three most commonly chosen “negative” feelings were “confused,” “criticized,” and “misunderstood.” This seems to be important, because these feelings, while more “negative” than some of the other options, are also somewhat ambivalent. These choices leave me with the impression that students were expecting their teachers to understand them and the personal stories they chose to tell, and their reactions were influenced by the sense that they were being misjudged.
Close to half of the students also believed their personal narrative assignments were just as useful as other writing assignments. Their options were “more useful,” “as useful as others,” “not as useful as others,” and “not useful at all.” Out of the 90 students who wrote personal narratives for an ENWR 105 class, 32.22% responded as finding the assignment “more useful” than others. Close to 49% of students thought it was “as useful as others.” Ten percent chose “not as useful.” Approximately 7% of the students answered that the personal narrative was “not useful at all” in comparison to other assignments of a similar weight for the course.
Over half of the student participants believed that writing their personal narratives improved their ability to write other college essays. Of the 90 students who wrote personal narratives for their ENWR 105 class 57.77% responded “yes” and 41.11% responded “no.”

Considering that the vast majority of students had positive reactions to the responses they received for their personal narratives, there were far fewer that actually
believed that their experiences of writing personal narratives changed their relationships with writing.
Interesting Trends

While the study summary breaks down the survey data into percentages and statistical facts, the purpose of the trends section of this thesis is to hone in on some particularly interesting and/or enlightening connections which appeared throughout these surveys. This holds especially true for the sections of the questionnaire which were labeled as “open-ended” responses. It was at these moments when students were free to relate two to three sentence responses in their own words. While these sections did not require students to reveal an incredible amount of personal detail, there were still some profound moments. These responses offered me some possibilities as to why some students believed a personal narrative was successful/unsuccessful or useful/less useful.

These open-ended questions asked students to really assess, in their own words, why they responded a certain way to how they were evaluated, why they believed an assignment was satisfying or unsatisfying, why they believed a personal narrative assignment improved their writing abilities, and how they believed it changed their relationships with writing.

Since many scholars such as Elbow, Miller, and Harris, have focused so much on what they believe the personal narrative does or does not accomplish for students, I believed it was imperative for me to ask my student participants for their own answers as to how and why they were affected by certain aspects of a personal narrative writing assignment.

The responses collected from the surveys represent five different trends that appeared frequently from the open-ended answers of student participants. While the
majority of the 90 students who responded that they had written a personal narrative for an ENWR 105 class gave responses which could place them in more than one of the five trends, many of these students seemed to have one primary focus. For the purpose of this thesis, these focuses are divided into five main categories: the importance of grades, the importance of peer and teacher comments about the students' experiences, the act of writing about personal issues for an assignment, the focus on improving their writing, and a lapse into the use of the second person perspective.

What follows is a break down of the characteristics of these trends, along with some quoted material provided by anonymous student participants when necessary to support these claims.
I Got a Good Grade

There were many student participants who responded to some of the open-ended questions with answers that had much to do with the grades they received. Many students who also responded that they were “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with how their personal narratives were responded to by their teachers and/or peers provided the “good grade” or “satisfactory grade” they received as one of the main reasons to support their feelings. Several responses followed along the lines of: “My grade was good, so I was happy.” This type of response accompanied stories of students who remarked that they had received an “A” or another high grade on their personal narratives. One student in particular responded: “My teacher found the paper very interesting. I received an A on the paper so I was happy with it.” This student’s response to a later question echoed this sentiment with the remark, “I was satisfied because I received an A on the paper.”

Even some students, who did not receive what they considered to be particularly high grades, still responded they were “okay” with the grade. As one student responded, “I’m not that good of a writer [sic] my mediocre B was a fine grade for me.” Interestingly enough, this student also left the response, “I don’t expect much from my papers.”

The frequency of these types of responses which focused on grades, and the importance of getting a “good grade” leads me to question whether students believe there is more value in the product that they produce, rather than the process which produces it. From many of these students’ responses, including those who I cited, it appeared that the success, or the meaningfulness behind writing a personal narrative was determined by
the letter or number value assigned to it, instead of a sense of how the assignment affected them as writers. Perhaps the letter or number grade was the only measure of success they could attribute to themselves as writers. It is also possible that whatever concerns or other feelings raised by writing these personal narratives were suppressed by the validation of receiving a high or “satisfactory” grade.
For several of the student participants, a common reason for enjoying their personal narrative writing assignments and the responses they received from them was the concept that they felt like someone “understood” and/or “appreciated” their experiences. This theme of feeling accepted by both professors and peers was one of the main points that led students to believe that the experience of writing a personal narrative was both rewarding for themselves and useful in their future college writing endeavors. As one student stated, “My professor’s comments made me feel like she understood me and supported me.” Other students followed this train of thought. One student answered, “It feels good to get any sort of positive re-inforcement [sic].” Another student responded, “The professor seemed interested in what I had to say. She was understanding and provided advice.”

It is also important to note that the two students who described feeling “not satisfied at all” with the responses given to their personal narratives, as well, as the process in total, were situated in this category. One of the students surveyed, who had a particularly negative reaction to the assignment, remarked: “I think my teacher didn’t understand my emotional struggle. I felt that she made judgements [sic] about me from that paper.” This student continued with this sentiment with the response: “Because I felt that she was judging me through my paper. Or that she though [sic] I was making it up.” Another student, who had also responded that they were “not satisfied at all” with the responses given to his or her personal narrative writing assignment, commented, “My professors [sic] comments were never very useful. I would have liked it if I had gotten
more feedback.” This student also wrote, “I felt as if my paper was unimportant to the professor. She did not take the assignment seriously.” Later, in regards to the usefulness of the personal narrative assignment as compared to other writing assignments, the student responded, “She graded all her assignments this way, but I think that she should have taken this more seriously than any other essay.”

The reactions of these student respondents, both positive and negative, bring many questions to light for me. Many of these heartfelt reactions about feeling “understood,” “accepted,” or “reinforced,” as well as those who felt “misunderstood,” “ignored” or “not taken seriously” lead me to think a lot about Dan Morgan’s article and his question about the roles of teachers to their students. It appears that the students who focused mainly on the comments they received from both professors and peers were looking for someone to say “I understand you,” or rather, “I value your experience” which essentially could be interpreted as “I value you.” Because I did not ask students to tell me about what they wrote for their personal narratives, I have no way of knowing what each student’s personal narrative contained.

I could speculate that the students who had a negative experience with their personal narratives wrote about things that their professors had no experience with, and therefore, felt ill-equipped to respond to. Linda Brodkey discusses a similar difficulty in her essay “On the Subjects of Class and Gender in “The Literacy Letters”.” Although Brodkey’s essay is more concerned with showing how class differences can be revealed through people’s writing, she makes a point about the student teacher relationship which I
believe may be crucial in understanding why some of my student participants felt like
their teachers did not understand their stories, or even make an attempt to do so.

The salient fact here is that educational discourse empowers teachers to
determine what is worthwhile in a student’s contributions, presumably
even if that judgment has little or no linguistic basis and even if a teacher-
student relationship is not entirely warranted. (Brodkey 689)

This is an important claim when thinking of my study, because it essentially highlights
the idea that while teachers might value a student’s personal story, they might be only
inclined to do so when the student is writing about something that the teacher believes to
be important. It also suggests that some teachers may really not have any way to relate to
some of the stories their students are sharing with them.
It was Easy to Write about Me

While this category is similar to the previous one, in regards to students responding more to comments and feedback, the focus is somewhat different. Instead of the students who wrote about a level of acceptance and at times, denial, these students wrote about feeling as if the writing itself was "easier" because they could talk about themselves and felt free to write about a subject that they "know really well"—mainly, themselves. For example, one student responded, "I don’t like writing but it allowed me to write about something I truly understand (people in my life) and compare with characters I didn’t fully understand." Another student stated: "I was ok with the response. It didn’t really matter to me either way. How bad of a grade could I get on [sic] paper about myself right?"

There were also responses that went a little deeper than just acknowledging the supposed ease of writing about one’s self. One student reported, "It was insightful. It helped me get to know myself by reviewing my own work and also having it reviewed by others." Yet another student pointed to some cathartic value of the assignment by describing how it felt to write about pain they had experienced. This student wrote, "I had a positive reaction. The students, as well as the teacher, enjoyed my story. It was not very gruesome, but it was a pain they all understood." While this student’s response seems to place them in the same category as students who had responded as feeling "accepted" or "understood," some of this student’s other comments led me to place them within this category. Later, this student replied, "I don’t have to worry about citations or legal problems. Was [sic] able to focus all my attentions on the style of my writing and
my expression of words.” The idea that writing becomes easier because a student doesn’t have to worry about “citations” or “legal problems,” is not a new concept, but it is interesting that the student believes that they were able to write more freely when they didn’t have to worry about possibly getting into “trouble.”

I am intrigued by many of these students’ responses, especially the first two or three that I quoted, because I wonder if they were led to believe that their personal narratives would not be graded, or even critiqued, as closely and carefully as other assignments. However, I think it is also important to consider what was gleaned from the last few students’ responses I quoted within this section. While they spoke about the “ease” associated with this assignment, I wonder if this perhaps has more to do with the student than it does with the assignment. It seems like the last two students I described, also had a story that they needed to tell. Perhaps this is where the “ease” of the assignment came in for them. Being able to tell a story that has never had an outlet before can be a very rewarding, and yes, even an easy activity, in the sense that it has been building and was waiting to be released.
My Teacher really Wanted to Help me Improve my Writing

While not as common a response as the three previously discussed, some students' interest in improving their writing ability through personal narratives appeared frequently enough to still be considered a trend. At times, this type of response was also given in relation to other types of responses, mainly in regards to the focus on feeling as if "someone understood my story." Several students gave responses which dealt with the comments given to them by their professors, but instead of these students focusing primarily on how their professors "understood" them or "supported" them, these respondents wrote about how their professors' comments helped improve their writing. One student answered, "The response caused me to think more carefully about the topic. The instructor's input was neither positive nor negative, rather his thoughts on what I had written [sic]." This student replied in a similar manner with, "The response was neither positive or [sic] negative but instead provoked me to think more carefully about what I had written."

There were several mentions of a professor's focus on grammar and other mechanics of writing as opposed to the content itself. As one student wrote, "Mostly what was discussed was grammar and writing style, not content. Therefore this did not have any impact on me other than complete agreement with the mistakes I made." To the same effect, another student responded, "I was satisfied with the grade and I thought the comments made on the paper were useful because they were going to help me improve my writing." This student also wrote, "The professor made grammatical corrections as well as gave me a comment on what I actually wrote so it allowed me to know they
actually read it.” This focus on grammar and mechanics points to a very common belief held by many student writers—mainly, that improving or “learning” good grammar and mechanics is the main factor of becoming a “good” writer.
Writing about Yourself can be Helpful to You because…

Something which caught my attention early on as I processed the information provided in these surveys was the tendency of several student participants to lapse into the second person perspective when answering certain open-ended questions. This retreat of the “I,” and the turn to the use of “you” in these responses tended to occur more often with questions that asked students why they believed their personal narratives had affected their abilities to write better essays and whether these personal narratives had changed their relationships with writing. This tended to happen more with students who responded primarily with a focus on grades, while it occurred the second most with students who responded with something akin to it being “easy” to write about themselves. There was an equal amount of this type of response for students who had a focus on “acceptance” and an “improvement on their writing.”

I think it is important to point out that the vast majority of the student respondents, who answered in the second person perspective, only did so for only one or two of the open-ended questions. One student responded, “You have more passion for what you are wiring [sic] because its [sic] your thoughts and your perspective writing about something that interests you.” This student, however, answered every other open-ended question from the first person, or “I,” perspective. Another student lapsed into the “you” form for a part of their response. This student wrote, “It is refreshing to write based on your own experiences rather than working from the text. It gives me a chance to be more creative and expressive.” Later the same student responded with the statement, “You get to work using your own style of writing.”
Considering that the majority of the "you" comments happened in response to how personal narratives had improved their writing abilities, I thought that perhaps something was misleading about the wording of the question. However, after reading this question over in comparison to other questions which mainly received a first-person perspective answer, it appears that the wording is similar enough as to not confuse the respondents.

However, I am curious as to why some students felt it necessary to respond in the second person narrative for only one or two questions. If these students had responded in the "you" format to every open-ended question on the survey, I think it would be easy to dismiss this occurrence as a student's difficulty in grasping certain grammatical conventions. This very well might be the case for one or two of my student respondents, especially in the case of the student who lapsed into this type of response only partially through an answer. Knowing that this was not the case for the majority of the students with this type of response, leads me to pose other questions.

What could possibly be the purpose of students using the "you" perspective for only certain parts of the survey? They were not being tested. They were not being graded. I did not even have a way of distinguishing between any of my student respondents and their surveys. However, it seems to me that some students were giving the answers they believed they were supposed to give. It is also possible that some students simply did not know how to respond. They were looking for the "right" answer to give, and gave a generic answer about what a personal narrative should do, instead of what it actually did for them.
Further Research

Although the collected survey data proved to be very informative, I found myself wanting to know more about certain student responses and answers. When thinking about the evaluation of student personal narratives, I think it would be important to know if students were aware of whether they were going to be graded on this specific assignment, and if so, did they know exactly what methods would be used to evaluate their personal narratives. I think this information would help in understanding more student reactions, mainly because some students may have been surprised that their narratives were graded a certain way (or at all for that matter), and this possibly could have been a factor in some being less satisfying experiences. Also, it is possible that if a student knew his or her narrative was going to be evaluated a certain way, he or she may have decided to write about a particular personal experience to please the professor.

This idea leads me to another question I believe is important in better understanding the student’s relationship with a personal narrative: What led them to choose the specific topic they wrote about for their personal narrative? Of course, the majority of professors gave specific assignments, but I think there is a likely possibility that most students had more than one experience they could talk about. I think there would still be some choice made on the student’s behalf as to what personal story to share. However, it is also telling if the student found the assignment to be restrictive because the student really did not have more than one particular experience that met the needs of the assignment. In that case, that student may have felt pressed to write about a specific experience, even if it was upsetting.
I think too, that it would be interesting to ask students how they felt about knowing their professors were reading their personal narratives. Instead of just asking students how they felt about the responses they received for their personal narratives, I think now I would like to know how they felt while their teachers were still reading and/or evaluating their narratives. I think knowing this information would provide insight into the students’ full range of emotions during the entire experience.
Conclusion

The student surveys provided me with some results that I was not expecting. In some ways these results led me to question what I initially believed about personal narrative assignments—they do students more harm than good. It is at this point that I think I should provide some insight into what led me to this train of thought. Just like Dan Morgan had to provide a personal story of his own to raise concerns about personal narratives in the classroom, I believe it is necessary for me to provide a story as to how I became invested in this topic.

In the Fall of 2005, I entered graduate school at Montclair State University. Only four months prior, in May 2005, I graduated with my B.A. in English with a concentration in Creative Writing from Montclair as well. A month before my anticipated graduation date, during early April, my father died. It was expected, as he had been hospitalized for over a month and in a comatose state for the last two weeks of his life. He wasn’t going to get better—that much was obvious. As much as his death was most likely a much needed release from his own suffering, it was still incredibly taxing on the family he left behind. It was difficult for me, but I didn’t have time to fall apart.

When I started my first semester of graduate school, I was still hauling quite a lot of baggage. On top of my unsorted feelings about my father’s death, I was also intimidated and anxious about starting a new phase in my academic life. I had decided to take a full-time course load in hopes of finishing the program in two years. Although
many people in my life had faith in me to do well with this new experience, I wasn’t really too sure if I could succeed.

My classes proved to be challenging, and for the most part that struggle distracted me from other things. There was one class I was taking, however, where I felt like certain pains I had were being constantly poked and prodded. This class required a lot of writing, but more than that it challenged me to write about things I found troubling. The effects of not grieving for my father’s death started to show in my writing, and eventually the story was revealed in one of the class’s many assignments. I admit I felt relief after I first wrote it. Perhaps what I felt is similar to what David Schaafsma was talking about in regards to his own class, where students were telling stories that needed to be told.

However, my sense of relief changed when I received my professor’s comments for the assignment. Although my father’s death was a large part of the essay, it was not the only thing that mattered, and actually was not the point of the essay. This was not a personal narrative for personal narrative’s sake. It was a critical essay showing how my beliefs about life support and the right to life varied greatly when it was my father who was affected, and not just another person I had heard about on the news.

When my professor specifically asked me to “say more” about my personal feelings about my father’s death, I had the immediate reaction that I had told this professor enough. This person did not have the right to hear anymore of my story because I had said everything that I was comfortable saying. Even though I had been in school for most of my life at that point, it was the first time I truly felt like rebelling
against a teacher. I wanted to say “no” because this was my story and I had the right to share as little or as much of it as I wanted to.

In the end though, fear of a “bad” grade led me to “say more.” When I showed up to the next class the professor was so moved by my essay that I was asked to read it to the class. I did not want to, but I had not specifically said that I did not want it shared with the class when I first handed it in. It was fair game. It was long and I did not want to read certain parts because I would cry whenever I got to them, so the professor asked if anyone else would like to read parts of it out loud as well. Several people volunteered.

While my essay was read by other people, and I had digested what was going on, I realized how uncomfortable I was at the moment. People were reading a story that they did not fully understand. There was so much that my father’s death changed about myself, my family, and my life that none of the people in the class who were reading my words and telling my story were aware of. There were things that could not be explained in that class, and more than that, I did not want to explain them. When the reading of my essay finished, many people thanked me for writing such a powerful piece and sharing it with them. I know that they meant well, but I was uncomfortable before, and at that point I just wanted to leave. It may have been selfish, but I didn’t really care that any of them were “moved.”

Discussion opened, and several people started to talk about experiences that were somewhat similar to mine. The week after, a few people even handed in essays that were deeply personal. I wonder though, whether people decided to hand in more personal pieces because as Schaafsma suggested they felt like it was a safe place to do so once
they saw someone else do it, or whether the praise I received for producing a “powerful” piece of writing led others to share their own stories to meet this standard as Anne Rugges Gere has claimed.

Looking back at this situation now, in light of all the questions I have asked myself since this incident and all of the scholarly articles, essays, and books I have read in preparation for this study, I admit I am probably more ambivalent about personal narrative assignments than I originally was when I first started to think about the ethics surrounding this topic. While my very real feelings of discomfort and anxiety would be reason enough for some teachers to argue against using personal narrative assignments, I question if my experience was truly as destructive to me as it first seemed. I certainly became more aware of what I revealed about myself through my writing after this incident, even if it did border on paranoia at times. As for whether this experience made my writing better or not, I cannot really say for sure. Shortly after this happened, I know I felt like I had been scraped clean—like someone had hollowed me out. I know that I did not really enjoy writing for a while after. I know that I felt like how my peers’ perception of me had changed. I don’t know if any of this really made me a better writer, though, and even if it did to some extent, I don’t know if this experience was the only way that possible improvement could be achieved.
Suggestions for Teachers

After all the information I have studied, I believe teachers who choose to give personal narrative writing assignments should keep a few things in mind. For one thing, teachers should be aware that students may choose to tell stories about traumatic events, questionable behavior or views, or other unsettling subjects. While these stories might not be incredibly terrible, they still might be very difficult to deal with, and might have an impact on the student-teacher relationship. Teachers need to decide whether they are able to deal with these types of personal narratives, because it is likely that they will eventually come across at least one problematic narrative.

Also, I believe teachers need to decide what the purpose of the personal narrative should be for their individual classrooms. Is the assignment meant to be some type of cathartic exercise that will be for the student alone? Is the assignment meant to help the student pose questions about their own personal beliefs, lifestyle, etc.? Or is the assignment meant to simply be a break for students in between more critical and possibly, more difficult assignments? I think it is safe to say that the narrative I provide within this conclusion was easier to read and digest than some other parts of this thesis in which I was struggling at times to articulate ideas and theories. Perhaps it is helpful to have this type of break for both students and teachers. Students possibly gain more confidence by writing about a subject they do not need to overanalyze or research, while teachers are able to read a piece that has a different format and style, and therefore requires a different type of reading.
I think it is also important to question the concept that personal narratives are so important for students because it allows them to write about what they know. I believe there is a problem with this reasoning, simply because it makes the assumption that students only know about themselves, and I would argue that this notion is faulty and somewhat insulting. I would argue that there are students who are interested in more than the football championship they won, or the friendships they found in a sorority, or the relationship that broke their hearts—I think if students were asked to write about a subject that interests them, a subject that inspires them, they would be able to produce critical works which have as much authority as their personal narratives would.
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Appendix A

The Personal Narrative Writing Assignment

A Survey

Krista Schlomann

Spring 2007

Part I

1. Did you take ENWR105: College Writing I at MSU? (if yes, proceed)
   Yes__________ No________

2. In this class were you ever given a personal writing assignment, that is, an
   assignment in which you were asked to disclose a personal experience? (if yes,
   proceed)
   Yes__________ No________

3. What were you asked to do for this assignment? (If you recall more than one
   assignment, choose the one that sticks out in your mind particularly.)

4. How was the assignment responded to: Check as many as you like:
   letter grade________
   check/lower stake grade________
   teacher comment________
   comment from peer________
   other________

5. What was your reaction to the response you received to your paper? (Please
   discuss in two or three sentences.)

6. How satisfied were you with the response to your personal narrative? (Check the
   option which best applies.)
   very satisfied________
   satisfied________
   slightly satisfied________
   not satisfied at all________
7. Explain why you felt the way you did in response to question 6. (Please discuss in two or three sentences.)

8. Check the words that most closely express your feelings.

accepted______ dismissed______
supported______ confused______
encouraged_____ criticized______
listened to______ ignored______
understood______ misunderstood______
pleased______ angered______

9. Compared to other assignments of similar weight for the course, how would you rank this one?

more useful_________ as useful as others_________
not as useful as others_________ not useful at all________

Part II

10. In your opinion, did this personal writing assignment, and others like it, help you improve your ability to write college essays? (if yes, proceed)

Yes__________ No_________

11. What leads you to believe that this personal writing assignment improved your writing ability? (Please discuss in two or three sentences.)

12. Do you believe your relationship with writing has changed because of your experience with a personal narrative assignment? (if yes, proceed)

13. How has your relationship with writing changed since your experience with a personal narrative assignment? (Please discuss in two or three sentences.)
CONSENT FORM FOR ADULTS

Please read below with care. You can ask questions at any time, now or later. You can talk to other people before you fill in this form.

Study’s Title: The Ethical Implication of Personal Narrative in the Classroom.

Why is this study being done? The purpose of this study is to assess how students believe writing personal narratives affects their writing abilities. The focus of this study be centered on what current students of ENWR 106: College Writing II believe they gained from the experience of writing personal narratives in ENWR 105: College Writing I. The aim of this study is to determine how useful students believe personal narrative writing assignments are in improving their ability to write college essays.

What will happen while you are in the study? In this study you will answer a short answer and multiple choice question survey about your experience with personal narrative writing assignments in your ENWR 105 class.

Time: This study will take about 15-20 minutes

Risks: The risks associated with participating in this study are no greater than those encountered in everyday life.

In the event that you find yourself emotionally distressed from participating in this study, please contact Montclair State University’s Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) at 1-973-655-5211.

Benefits: There are no personal benefits associated with participation in this study.

Who will know that you are in this study? You will not be linked to any presentations. We will keep who you are confidential (Or if applicable, anonymous) according to the law.

Do you have to be in the study?

You do not have to be in this study. You are a volunteer! It is okay if you want to stop at any time and not be in the study. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Nothing will happen to you. You will still get the things that you were promised.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Do you have any questions about this study?</strong></th>
<th>Phone or email the (Principal Investigator’s name, address, phone number, and email address).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Do you have any questions about your rights?</strong></td>
<td>Phone or email the interim IRB chair, Tim Kirby (<a href="mailto:kirbyt@mail.montclair.edu">kirbyt@mail.montclair.edu</a>, 973-655-7534) or the IRB Administrator, Fitzgerald Edwards (<a href="mailto:edwardsf@mail.montclair.edu">edwardsf@mail.montclair.edu</a>, 973-655-7781).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It is okay to use my data in other studies:
Please initial: _____ Yes _____ No

I would like to get a summary of this study:
Please initial: _____ Yes _____ No

When the investigator is audiotaping, videotaping or photographing individual subjects, add the following two statements:
It is okay to (audiotape, videotape, or photograph) me while I am in this study:
Please initial: _____ Yes _____ No

It is not okay to (audiotape, videotape, or photograph) me while I am in this study:
Please initial: _____ Yes _____ No

When the investigator is audiotaping, videotaping or photographing groups such as a class, add the following two statements:
It is okay to use my (audiotaped, videotaped or photographed) data in the research.
Please initial: _____ Yes _____ No

It is not okay to use my (audiotaped, videotaped or photographed) data in the research.
Please initial: _____ Yes _____ No

The copy of this consent form is for you to keep.

If you choose to be in this study, please fill in your lines below.

Print your name here: ___________________________  Sign your name here: ___________________________

Krista Schlomann  ___________________________  Signature  ___________________________

Name of Principal Investigator  ___________________________  Date

Emily Isaacs  ___________________________  Signature  ___________________________

Name of Faculty Sponsor  ___________________________  Date