

Literacy Memoirs INVOLVING STUDENTS IN MEANINGFUL WRITING

STUDENTS USUALLY VIEW WRITING AS A REQUIREMENT TO PASS A GRADE, OR as homework, but not as a lively means to express their joys, sorrows, experiences, or curiosities. However, through writing their literacy memoirs, students can overcome their reluctance to write and show significant progress in the process. A memoir, unlike general schoolwork, can make students reflect about those specific and memorable events that have contributed along the road to literacy. Using process writing to tell that story in English can be a meaningful experience for students.

Considerations on literacy

Traditionally, the word *literacy* has been used to mean the ability to read and write. Now, *literacy* means the competence “to carry out complex tasks using reading and writing related to the world of work and to life outside school” (*Cases in Literacy* 1989, 36). The term *literacy* is being used in other ways such as in *cultural literacy*, defined as a way to introduce children “to the major ideas and ideals from past cultures that have defined and shaped today’s society” (Hirsch 1987, 10). However, most researchers agree that literacy is a tool, a way to learn about the world and a means to participate more fully in the technological society of the twenty-first century. It is also important to note that literacy abilities are acquired by individuals only through participation in socially organized activities with written language. In defining literacy as a social activity, Barton (1994) implies that literacy has certain roles in society, according to the demands of the community where one lives.

Literacy uses a symbolic system to represent the world to ourselves, and language is the symbolic system that links what goes on inside our heads with what goes on outside. Language mediates between the self and society and enables us to read, think, and write about the world around us.

The reading and writing connection

Broad consensus exists about the relationship between reading and writing. Most experts agree that reading and writing are similar and mutually supportive language processes (Butler and Turbill 1984). Both rely on the reader’s or writer’s background knowledge to construct meaning and both make use of cueing systems (graphic, semantic, syntactic) to allow the reader or writer to predict and confirm meaning. Traditionally, as stated by Shanahan (1997), reading and writing have been viewed as two separate processes with little in common. However, much of the research is guided by the theory that both reading and writing involve meaning making.

An important point in the theory about reading and writing is that both share similar linguistic and cognitive elements. As readers read and writers compose, both plan, draft, align, revise, and monitor. When readers plan, they anticipate content; they draft when they

have a first picture of content; and they align, revise, and monitor when they verify their comprehension, guess, or reread. Planning involves two processes: setting goals and using prior knowledge based on the reader’s background or personal experience. Readers look for clues to help them predict the upcoming meaning of the text. Then the reader drafts as he or she has a first impression of the text. In aligning, readers select their viewpoint. Alignment requires that readers and writers reread, rethink, reexamine, and review the author’s stance in order to interpret the text. During revision and monitoring, readers and writers evaluate what they have read or written, while composing meaning. Readers and writers are involved in many of the same activities. They generate ideas, organize, monitor, problem-solve, and revise.

In his influential study about the relationship between reading and writing, Stotsky (1983) concluded that: (1) good writers tend to be better readers than are less able writers; (2) good writers tend to read more frequently and widely and to produce more syntactically complex writing; (3) writing itself does not tend to influence reading comprehension, but when writing is taught for the purpose of enhancing reading, there are significant gains in comprehension and retention of information; and (4) reading experiences have as great an effect on writing as direct instruction in grammar and mechanics.

Process writing

The value of process writing in the classroom has been widely stressed. Students are encouraged to explore a topic through writing, to share drafts with teachers and peers, and to use each draft as a beginning for the next. Vivian Zamel (1985) recommended process writing as she castigated sentence-combining because it ignored “the enormous complexity of writing (pre-writing, organizing, developing, proofreading, revising, etc.)” (1976, 89). She stated that “the act of composing should become the result of a genuine need to express one’s personal feelings, experience, or reactions, all within a climate of encouragement” (1980, 89). Peter Elbow and Nancy Sommers, as cited by Reid (1993, 31), described writing as a “discovery procedure which relies heavily on the power of revision to clarify and refine that discovery.”

Through planning, drafting, revising, editing, with peer and teacher feedback, many teachers have discovered, accepted, and implemented the approaches, and philosophy, associated with process writing. Students begin by gathering ideas from their own experience and knowledge and then turn to other sources as they search for their own topic (Reid 1993). They are given the opportunity to explore a variety of systematic methods of discovery while they read, write, and talk to each other.

Another important aspect of process writing is peer review, which has been proven useful in many ways. First, peer review gives students opportunities to share their strategies and their work and to get feedback from a variety of readers. Texts do not evolve in a vacuum, and peer review groups enable students to realize that social, political, and personal contexts influence writing. Secondly, peer review helps writers at all levels of writing proficiency understand their interactive relationship with their readers. Their fellow students question varied interpretations and misunderstandings and dramatize the necessity for the writers to provide verbal signs that will enable readers to understand the intended meaning. Thirdly, peer review promotes respect for negotiation and co-operation, a spirit of mutual responsibility, in addition to respect and trust. Finally, students in peer review groups learn and practice a "language of response," gaining a perspective about their audience and an assessment of writing in terms of how their readers may react to or comprehend their text (Reid 1993).

A writing workshop

The students taking part in this workshop were attending their English sixth class in an undergraduate program in English, and the syllabus of the course stated that writing should be emphasized. Therefore I proposed writing literacy memoirs as a means to fulfill the objectives of the course.

Literacy memoirs was understood in the workshop as defined by William Zinsser, cited by Dillon (2000, 21), as "unlike an autobiography, which moves in a dutiful line from birth to fame, omitting nothing significant.... [Rather,] the writer of a memoir takes us back to a corner of his or her life that was unusually vivid or intense....[A] memoir is a window into a life."

A memoir is also an opportunity to understand social, cultural, and historical events in our past, as well as individuals and texts that have influenced who we are today. Thus, students were told to write about those vivid experiences, events, decisions, or people that had influenced or shaped them into the literate individuals they are.

The first step was reading samples of literacy memoirs (two excerpts are given in Appendix A). Reading was used to take advantage of its interactivity with writing. Therefore, through reading these samples, students were expected to discover the topics and writing strategies that had led the writers to produce those pieces. These samples were read and analyzed in terms of their content and organization.

The next step was for students to think about vivid experiences they wanted to write about and share with others, as they were told that their writings would be published in a compendium or "book" that would be kept at the department library.

Then, students came up with topics such as:

- How I became a teacher
- Difficulties in finding the right field of study at the university
- How I fell in love with the English language
- A significant adventure in literacy from childhood
- Reading and writing experiences throughout different levels of education
- Dilemmas about becoming a teacher
- A hidden dream to become an architect

After thinking about their topics, students wrote their plans using lists of ideas or diagrams, including the significant events they would take into account to develop their writing. Students later handed their plans to their peers, who gave them written feedback. For the feedback, I told them to ask whether the event would be described in chronological order and what specific examples the writer would include. Peer work was used to give the writers the idea of an audience so that they could think about the potential reader and know that writing would be a collaborative work where readers and writers could learn together through interaction.

In the next step, students wrote the first draft and gave it to their peers for revision in

class. I made it very clear that in this first reading peer reviewers would be focusing on content and reminded them to concentrate on meaning that could maximize appeal for the reader. Then, I gave students a checklist to guide their feedback. The list included questions such as:

- Is there a unity of development?
- Is the whole writing focused on the same topic?
- Is there enough information about the event?
- Do I want to know more about this specific event?
- Are there vivid examples to make the writing interesting?
- Are the beginning, development, and ending clear?
- Do I feel interested in the story?
- How can the writer make it more interesting for the reader?
- Is there a balance in the information?
- Are there any unnecessary details?
- Does the beginning catch the reader's attention?

- Is it necessary to add a more striking ending?
- Does the account of events give me a complete picture of the experience?

After the students wrote their feedback in class, I collected that draft and gave the writers feedback based on the same checklist. When I returned the first draft, I talked to each student individually about the feedback given. I had 25 students in this class, so it involved significant time and effort to do this activity, but this kind of individual tutoring is necessary because each student shows a different problem.

Then students wrote a second draft, taking into account the suggestions given by their peers and me. Each new draft had to include the previous ones so that peers, writers, and I could notice the improvements. Once the second draft was handed to peers, it was time to edit it. Students were asked to correct conventions (spelling, punctuation, capitalization), organization, and grammar. In reviewing the organization, they were asked to concentrate on paragraphs, giving suggestions to use similar ideas for one paragraph and to develop one topic sentence in each paragraph. For gram-

PRODUCING A COMPENDIUM OF STUDENTS' MEMOIRS

A Summary of the Process

FIRST WEEK	Reading of samples of literacy memoirs. (See Appendix A). Analysis of content and organization.
SECOND WEEK	Students chose topics and wrote plans for writing their literacy memoirs. Peer review in class. Students rewrote their plans (if necessary, according to peer's feedback) and handed them in to the teacher.
THIRD WEEK	Students got plans back and started writing the first draft (with suggestions from peers and teacher).
FOURTH WEEK	First draft was submitted. Peer revision in class. Teacher read and revised outside class (content: focus, title, beginning, ending, examples).
FIFTH WEEK	Teacher returned the first draft (with feedback from peers and teacher).
SIXTH WEEK	Students brought second draft to class. Peer editing in class (grammar, spelling, punctuation, organization). Teacher took second draft home for editing.
SEVENTH WEEK	Teacher returned second draft with feedback (editing) from peers and teacher.
EIGHTH WEEK	Students published their articles. (See Appendix B)

mar they used a correction code they were familiar with (/: unnecessary word; WO: word order, VT: verb tense; VF: verb form; WW: wrong word; etc.).

I collected the second drafts and edited them as well. Again I gave students written and oral feedback, focusing on paragraph organization since several students wrote one-sentence paragraphs or included different ideas or events in the same paragraph.

Throughout the writing process, students were supposed to make the relevant corrections after getting feedback from peers and then after my feedback. Revising would have been easy with computers; however, students didn't have easy access to computers at home or at the university. Sometimes they could type their paper but could not print it, so very few students were able to type all drafts on a computer. It was not until the last draft that all students typed their work and gave it to me on a floppy disk, with nice formats in most cases, since they knew that the articles would be printed and published in a compendium or "book."

The students were very excited about the publication of their work. After receiving all the articles, I wrote an introduction with the theory, procedure, and outcomes involved. Two compendiums or "books" were bound and kept at the department library for students in other classes to read.

A summary of the process used to produce the students' memoirs appears in the chart on the previous page.

Observations on the workshop

Students viewed themselves as writers. Writing a good piece gave them confidence, helped them discover their strengths, made them feel satisfied with their work, and gave them a sense of achievement and belief in their own skills, as students pointed out:

- "At the beginning I didn't know what to do, but after writing the different drafts, I got confident and could write very well."
- "I couldn't believe in my abilities to write. This was an opportunity for me to believe that I could become a good writer."

These comments show that students are aware of their own capacities to use English. Their opinions helped them build their self-esteem and confidence in their communica-

tive competence in the language. The mastery of all linguistic skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing that they were expected to achieve at this level helped them see themselves as successful users of English.

Students valued the process. They became aware that writing takes time and effort and that it is a complex, recursive process that demands their commitment and dedication. We can notice that through their own words:

- "I made a lot of progress in writing because I learned some useful techniques."
- "It was a very good experience because I wrote something I liked and I learned to write stage by stage."

The process of exploring a topic through writing, sharing drafts, revising, and editing showed students the value of using each draft as the beginning of the next. Revision and editing helped them refine the discovery and the power of working step by step. Process writing gave the students a feeling of discovery and achievement, lowering anxiety and strengthening their confidence in learning.

Writing became a rewarding activity. The students enjoyed writing their literacy memoirs. As stated earlier, reluctance to write is one of the biggest problems teachers face today; however, this problem was tackled appropriately throughout this experience, as students said:

- "I enjoyed writing about my own feelings in English."
- "It was a very good experience for me because I could write about a little part of my life in English and at the same time I learned how to do it."

Writing a memoir gave students motivation to write and involved them affectively with their task. Affectivity, often overlooked by teachers, plays an important role as students become involved in a rewarding, pleasant, and satisfactory activity that makes writing in the second language enjoyable, meaningful, and memorable.

Peer review played an important role. Students were very receptive to their peers' comments. They were eager to read the comments, and it was amazing for me to notice how accurate peers' feedback was, not only referring to content but to form as well. It was evident that students worked collaboratively and developed

an interactive relationship as readers and writers, learning from one another. Peer correction gave the writers the feeling of readership and therefore helped them build the idea of writing to impact and impress the reader. Besides, the fact that the audience was not only the teacher gave the students additional motivation to write. They worked more enthusiastically because they knew that their articles would be published in a compendium or “book” that would be kept at the department library and therefore might be read by students in other classes. They also knew that their drafts would be used in a workshop with teachers.

Computers make revision easier. Using a computer is invaluable for an activity like this one, even though in our case it was not possible to type and correct the drafts since most students didn't have easy access to a computer. It is easy and less time-consuming to correct draft after draft in the computer. This stresses the need for students to become computer literate.

An opportunity to know the students better is at hand. I must admit that I saw my students differently when I read about their lives. Their dilemmas about whether or not to become teachers, the way they fell in love with the English language, the influential people in their lives, their struggles to find the right fields of study after secondary school, the change from secondary school to university life, and even the hard lives some of them had led were all moving. After reading their stories I saw them as human beings with struggles, histories, and expectations not yet met who were eager to discover new paths in life. Recognizing my students' background and the individuals and experiences that helped them shape their decisions helped me understand their cultural background and find better ways to meet their needs.

Conclusion

Given the right conditions, writing can become a rewarding activity that fosters students' language competence, and in this case, it was proved that asking students to write a literacy memoir can inspire students to write a

piece that provides opportunities to reflect on a past experience that helped develop their literacy, giving them the possibility to become better writers in English as well. Reading students' memoirs provides the teacher with valuable information about the students' cultural background that can enrich the student-teacher relationship and empower the teacher to create and maintain an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding so that learning English is not only a cognitive task but a rich human experience as well.

References

- Barton, D. 1994. *Literacy: An introduction to the ecology of written language*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Butler, A., and J. Turbill. 1984. *Towards a reading-writing classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Cases in literacy: An agenda for discussion.* 1989. Newark, DE: International Reading Association and The National Council of Teachers of English.
- Dillon, R. D. 2000. *Kids insight: Reconsidering how to meet the literacy needs of all students*. Newark: International Reading Association.
- Hirsh, E. D., Jr. 1987. *Cultural literacy: What every American needs to know*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Reid, J. M. 1993. *Teaching ESL writing*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Regents.
- Shanahan, T. 1997. Reading-Writing relationships, thematic units, inquiry learning: In pursuit of effective integrated literacy instruction. *The Reading Teacher* 52: 12–19.
- Stotsky, S. 1983. Research on reading-writing relationship: A synthesis and suggested directions. *Language Arts* 60: 627–42.
- Zamel, V. 1976. Teaching composition in the ESL classroom: What we can learn from research in the teaching of English. *TESOL Quarterly* 10 (1): 67–76.
- . 1980. Re-evaluating sentence-combining practice. *TESOL Quarterly* 14 (1): 81–90.
- . 1985. Responding to student writing. *TESOL Quarterly* 19 (1): 79–102.

GILMA ZUÑIGA CAMACHO is a professor in the Modern Languages Program at Universidad Surcolombiana in Neiva, Colombia, and is author of the book *Constructing Literacy from Reading in First and Second Language*.

APPENDIX A | SAMPLE LITERACY MEMOIRS

Literacy Memoirs: Involving Students in Meaningful Writing • Gilma Zuñiga Camacho

Excerpt 1

In my first experiences with the literate world, it is my mother who influenced me most. It was from her that I heard words referring to the dignity of women, the need to have an education, economic independence, and power from arts and letters. She taught us how to read and write and was very proud telling everybody that all her children could read and write before going to school. Typing, as well, was something we all learned at home under my mother's guidance. I remember seeing heaps of paper we had to type on the first day of vacation. I keep at home that old Remington typewriter, with which all my brothers and sisters learned how to type. I managed to inherit it after endless battles with my brothers and sisters.

From: Zuñiga, G. 2001. *My Mother Tongue*. Unpublished manuscript.

Excerpt 2

Sunday mornings were very special for me and my family. I still remember the smell of cleanliness, the gentleness and tenderness with which my mother dressed me in the pleated skirt and pink blouse of my uniform. Then we would go to Mass in line from the school. I also remember the smell of freshness from the morning mist over the green leaves of the trees in my town. At church, we sang songs and the Bible was read. These were my first encounters with the literate world. At home, my mother read the notes sent from the school and I used to sit by my father while he was reading the newspaper every day. I knew that very soon I would be able to read with him, when I finished kindergarten. (*translated by G. Zuñiga Camacho*)

From: Clavijo, A. 2000. *Formación de Maestros, Historia y Vida* [From Teachers' Life Histories to Classroom Practices]. Santafé de Bogotá: Plaza & Janes en convenio con La Universidad Distrital. (Reprinted with permission.)

APPENDIX B | STUDENT LITERACY MEMOIR

Literacy Memoirs: Involving Students in Meaningful Writing • Gilma Zuñiga Camacho

My Best Experiences

by Adriana Solange Rojas

I have a lot of experiences from my childhood and they are basically related more to reading than to writing. I remember that my first contact with books was at home and although at that time I didn't know how to read because I was three, I used to have a quick look at the books, especially the pictures which were quite colorful and I used to move my mouth as if I was actually reading.

At the age of five, I was already able to read, so my parents bought my brothers and me more books. One of them was a set of stories that included cassettes. It was a nice collection and I enjoyed them because I used to read and listen to the story at the same time. My brother was fond of making up stories in which he mixed all kinds of readings for children and mentioned me in them. I got angry easily and cried.

At school, I don't remember very well this stage, but my mother told me that I read from the textbooks where I could find fairy tales and some fables. When I was in 4th and 5th grade, my teacher took us to a small library. There were plenty of cushions, many books which were classified according to the gender and some pictures. Every time we entered there, we felt relaxed and comfortable, no shoes, no noise. It was the right place to read and forget about the real world. So, we chose the book we wanted and then we just laid down on the floor. The next day, we used to tell the stories we had read and made drawings according to the plots.

My experiences from high school were nice, although not as good as in primary school. When I was in 6th, 7th, and 8th grade, I had the same Spanish teacher. She was short but had a strong voice and her appearance inspired respect. I admit I learnt a lot with her because we had the opportunity to analyze many masterpieces and write essays, but I didn't like the way she evaluated us. She was very strict and didn't tolerate anyone to make mistakes. That's why she was sometimes cruel and made us feel disappointed, so this created a tense atmosphere that didn't let us express our thoughts freely.

In the following years, I had other teachers but specially one, who has been the best teacher I've ever had. He was fond of reading all kinds of books and I remember he showed us newspapers in which there were articles, poems, and essays that he wrote. He did it in order to invite us to read and write but mainly to set an example and be a good model. Although he was strict, we trusted him. He loved literature and poetry and taught us many ways to enjoy and analyze them. We had to read certain books for his classes, and for the first time I decided to read a book I could choose, it was "La Hojarasca," a very well known story written by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the Colombian Nobel Prize winner.

The book I liked the most during my last year of secondary school was *The Odyssey* because we went deeper and deeper in the story through presentations, dramatizations, and essays. I think that at this stage I began to practice more my writing skill which I considered a little difficult even in Spanish.

At University, I have had good experiences as well. At the beginning of my course of studies I didn't like some subjects related to Spanish because they were boring. In the second year, however, during a course of history of Spanish literature, that feeling changed. Our teacher motivated us to read masterpieces of Spanish and Colombian Literature. We enjoyed his classes and we never got bored because he had a particular way of explaining everything. He has been one of the best teachers I've ever had at the University.

Now, I try to read books more frequently, not only in Spanish but in English too, so I choose literary texts because I think that reading those sort of books gives me the opportunity to make imaginary trips, and to get to know remote places through magnificent characters I can identify with.