Marginalized Students Need to Write About Their Lives: Meaningful Assignments for Analysis and Affirmation

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Nancy Mack

Abstract: The bias against personal experience manifests in writing courses as privileging the citation of scholars, fearing emotional writing, and equating argumentation with democratic ideals. To value the lives and knowledges of marginalized students, the curricular goals, assignments, and activities for writing courses needs to be reconsidered. Culturally sustaining pedagogy explores, extends, and examines the experiences of students. Meaningful, experience-based, narrative writing assignments are suggested: memoir essays, ethnographic research reports, and multigenre interview projects. Analysis activities challenge students to examine a chosen experience through several scholarly lenses. By adding complex analysis to their writing, students gain a challenging new experience that considers past, present, and future influences upon their identity formation. Experience-based writing assignments make room for home language through dialogue and informal genres that include intentional code meshing and translingualing. This inclusion prompts questions about academic language conflicts and opens discussion about how language represents identity, negotiates hierarchies, and permits agency.

Introduction

In my white, working-class high school in a segregated Midwestern town, we were considered to be uncultured and saying ain’t was a punishable offense. Our senior English teachers created cultured graduation requirements in addition to having to pass all the courses. Among the requirements were identifying classical paintings and memorizing numerous Shakespeare quotes. As a first-generation college student, I attended a state university where I felt like an imposter next to wealthy suburban girls who came from better, larger high schools. For writing assignments, I turned my shame into self-deprecating humor about our frugal family vacations, my vision problems, and my lack of social skills. After graduate courses in folklore and ethnography, I began to understand that all people have a culture worthy of analysis. I grew to appreciate my working-class identity and all that I learned from my parents. As a place-bound female, I happily accepted my second university position back in my hometown where I taught students whose life experiences I understood and respected. After tenure, I decided to offer a course about working-class memoir. A colleague’s off-handed reaction to the course topic stunned me into silence: “Why would any of the students here want to write about something that they are busy trying to escape?” In contrast to this comment, my students have always found meaning in assignments that make space for them to write about their lives, and I have been fortunate to share in their efforts.

Writing that does not speak for their lives excludes marginalized students[1][#_ftn1] so that they are never fully acknowledged by anyone at the university. Having grown up in a culture full of misrepresentations, marginalized students need to question how they want to be represented in their writing. If they are not permitted to testify for their lives as writers, marginalized students might as well have never come to the university; or to paraphrase Sims, they are only distorted shadows without substance. Marginalized students must be seen and heard as complex individuals; otherwise, efforts for social justice only serve to make the elite feel good about themselves (hooks). Moreover, the isolated academy has much to learn from the wider perspectives and grounded wisdom of marginalized students.

The first section of this article discusses the academic rejection of experience and how this assumption manifests in problematic attitudes about citation, emotion, and argumentation. The next section addresses
biases about the cultures and identities of marginalized students in the writing curricula, assignments, and topics. I provide an overview of three categories of meaningful writing assignments that draw from students’ lives: memoir, ethnographic research reports, and multigenre interview projects. Activities are detailed for the complex analysis of experience and validation of home languages that will be helpful for marginalized students as they continue their education within the hierarchical academy. These assignments and activities were developed during my career teaching at three prisons and two working-class universities.

**Problematic Attitudes about Citation, Emotion, and Argumentation**

When I started teaching in prison, my experiences and cultural narratives about prison life conflicted, causing me considerable cognitive dissonance. Meanwhile, I was accepted to present a paper at a small critical theory conference. Several senior faculty were going to dinner and invited me to come along. Near to the end of the evening, the conversation turned to me in what was surely an effort to make me feel included. Someone asked what teaching in prison was like. Before I could say anything, people began hypothesizing about what teaching in prison was like. Jokes were made about inmates being a captive audience and so on. These scholars were taking turns telling me what my experiences were—based solely on media portrayals of prisoners being housed in individual cells instead of in large rooms stacked full of bunk beds. I felt alienated and angry. They were more interested in hearing each other speak than in anything I could have said. Thankfully, all the pontification ended when the server said that the restaurant was closing, and we had to leave. I went out into the cold dark night, feeling glad that I had kept the knowledge that I could have shared to myself. I tell this story to represent what it feels like to have one’s experiences reduced to a stereotype.

Attempts at being inclusive out of kindness may be benevolent; however, devaluing the experiences that are meaningful part of students’ identities prevents them from feeling included and supported. Godbee advocates for those who are silenced in institutional settings: “Stripping epistemic rights not only denies people their production or reception of spoken words or written text, but also denies their personhood” (599). The assumption that marginalized students’ experiences are not credible topics for writing is a form of what Fricker describes as epistemic injustice. Writing teachers must reconsider whose knowledge is being valued by their assignments and whether those assignments enhance the elite academy more than they support marginalized students’ development as writers. This rejection of experience manifests in problematic attitudes about citation, emotion, and argumentation.

**Citation.** Insisting that writing must be based solely upon the publications of elite authors discounts the experiences of marginalized students. This requirement causes students to have an even greater distance to climb to achieve status in relation to their topics. Godbee portrays the unequal power relations that marginalized writers suffer as “the navigational work of writing up” (614). Citation of peer-reviewed academic sources primarily advances the careers of elite white heterosexual male authors and upholds that hierarchy (Woody). Most of the sources assigned to marginalized students lack their voices and social realities (Thapar-Björkert and Farahani). The rejection of experience is not confined to students’ texts. The sources that students cite will probably not be narratives about the lives of academics. Robillard contends that academics view narratives as less intellectual and less scholarly (We Find Ourselves). Scholarly writing is assumed to be more objective, scientific, and less personal and emotional; thus, intellectual writing is pitted against the emotional in a false binary (Wilde).

**Emotion.** Colleagues have told me that they do not assign any type of personal narrative for fear of receiving writing that relates a traumatic experience or is overly emotional. These teachers claim to be unqualified to deal with the emotions expressed in students’ texts and believe that such disclosures are more suited for therapists. To preemptively dismiss an entire mode of writing and exclude what could be learned from marginalized students’ experiences is a form of willful ignorance (Pohlhaus). Willful ignorance of the traumas in marginalized students’ lives shuts down any consideration of the resources that might be marshalled to support these students and perpetuates systematic injustice. Emotional disclosures cannot be
kept out of a course (Payne). Reading texts elicits emotional responses and shared personal experiences. Even the mundane tasks of keeping track of attendance and collecting work when it is due will implicate a teacher in hearing about the problems in students’ lives. Ignoring such stories, or writing them off as outliers, causes harm (Falconer; Wilde). Shielding ourselves from understanding the experiences of marginalized students only makes it easier to ignore institutional problems and to blame economic inequality on a lack of individual effort.

**Argumentation.** Currently, argumentative writing has become the central focus of both high school and first-year college courses (Sullivan). Most textbooks credit argumentative writing as essential for maintaining democracy—as if a well-crafted argument is all that is needed to gain power against injustice (Ahmed). State standards emphasize counter arguments, warrants, and claims that simplify social problems into a debate between two polarized adversaries rather than an examination of complex factors affecting multiple stakeholders. In a *Research in the Teaching of English* article, DeStigter debunks three unwarranted beliefs about argumentative writing: “(1) that argumentative writing promotes clear and critical thinking, (2) that it provides training in the rational deliberation that is essential for a democratic citizenry, and (3) that it imparts to students a form of cultural capital that facilitates their upward academic and socioeconomic mobility” (11). DeStigter concludes his study with the recommendation that teachers give more meaningful writing assignments. Privileging one mode or format drastically limits what students can learn about academic writing. As Connors’ historical study illuminates, the rhetorical modes of argumentation, narration, description, and exposition are merely a discourse classification system that has not proven useful for the teaching of writing and have superseded the importance of the writer’s purpose. Reducing the writing curriculum to the teaching of argumentation creates problems with what it replaces and who it displaces (Schiavone).

Teachers often attempt to be inclusive by inviting students to write about a topic of interest. Students have played the game long enough to know that their lives outside of school are not valued and have become alienated from their own experiences. Convincing my students that their personal experiences are good topics for analysis takes days of prewriting activities and sharing previous students’ texts. Even then, students are likely to generate the types of narratives that they assume teachers want to hear (Webb-Sunderhaus; Gere). Ivanič faults the limitations placed on nontraditional students’ identities: “Writers construct a ‘discoursal self’ not out of an infinite range of possibilities, but out of the possibilities for self-hood which are supported by the socio-cultural and institutional context in which they are writing” (28). If we claim to value the complex lives and experiences of marginalized students, we need to reconsider the curricular goals, assignments, and activities for writing courses.

**Cultural Bias in the Curricula, Assignments, and Topics for Writing**

I never realized how much I dangled the carrot of upward mobility in front of my students until a frustrated inmate student accused me of having a money problem. This student happily responded to my request to understand his comment. He explained that I continually talked about how learning to write would help them to get a job and make money. He asserted that he already knew how to make money better than I did. I had to admit that money was indeed a huge issue for me. In my zeal to sell school literacy to them, I had constructed a narrative for learning to write that misrepresented the inmates as deficient. The inmates were already competent in many forms of literacy that I barely understood. All students deserve to be respected by their teachers. This section questions how students’ cultures and identities are represented in the curricula, assignments, and topics used for teaching writing.

**Curricula.** Marginalized students are frequently defined by what they don’t know rather than what they do know. In this way knowledge is defined in exclusionary terms (Brown), and the marginalized other has been reified into a pathological presence necessary to legitimize the privileged majority (Thapar-Björkert and Farahani). Deficit pedagogy isn’t just a belief that students’ skills are lacking; it is an assumption that their
Assignments. The same writing assignment can function in different ways, depending upon the intentions, beliefs, and values communicated by the teacher. Narrative writing is traditionally viewed as a simplistic assignment to be given at the beginning of the term as a warmup or best used with underprepared students to ease them into college writing. Murray suggests that the reflective narrative can be more than a single genre. Writing assignments need to be enlarged to include the cultures and identities of students. This wider approach might view narrative writing as a testimonial for marginalized students by situating their narratives within local contexts and dynamic social forces. Delgado Bernal et al. forward the Chicana/Latina concept of testimonio as a pedagogical, methodological, and activist approach to social justice that transgresses traditional paradigms in academia. Delgado Bernal et al. clarify that “Testimonio transcends descriptive discourse to one that is more performative in that the narrative simultaneously engages the personal and collective aspects of identity formation while translating choices, silences, and ultimately identities” (364). Describing assignments by genre rather than modes expands the possibilities to include narrative, descriptive, informative, and argumentative elements as needed in any genre. Writing should sustain students’ experiences as a source of knowledge that benefits from scholarly reflection and may empower social change (Case and Hunter). Pohlhaus lauds the knowledge to be gained from marginalized perspectives as “experience rich” because it offers epistemic resources that the dominant group does not possess (721). The testimonials written by marginalized students bring more of the experiential world to the academy. Testimonials require an empathetic audience willing to hear another’s worldview, especially when it is spoken with powerful emotions about the violence of racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and other oppressive realities. In Letters for the Living Blitz and Hurlbert stress the importance of understanding and responding to “…the personal and cultural implications of what each student is telling us, the uniqueness of each student, of each life” (29).

Topics. Whether the teacher makes room for students’ cultures and identities matters more than the writing assignment itself. The topics suggested by the teacher can limit the identities that marginalized students can inhabit. Liberatory efforts done for students instead of with students can function to misrepresent the cultures of marginalized students. I am reminded of a very good teacher who attempted to use a Foxfire ethnographic approach in Appalachia. The students were assigned to interview relatives about topics such as canning, whittling, and building fences. The students were more offended than engaged. They accused the teacher of believing that they were stereotypes like the characters from the Beverly Hillbillies. This somewhat dramatic example illustrates that students’ cultures should remain open for them to research and represent instead of an assumption made by others. A person’s cultural mix is unique, fluid, multiple, and conflicted (Guerra; Webb-Sunderhaus). Cultural heritage is part of each person’s evolving identity formation and is essential to what can be meaningful to one’s life. The best way to do no harm is to allow students to examine and represent their own identities and cultures, just as we have learned that self-disclosure of gender, sexuality, or ability is
better left to the individual. Teachers cannot know how identification functions for a student. For example, I refuse to destroy a working-class student’s belief in education as the great equalizer. If that belief functions to get students out of bed in the morning, I am happy to have them in attendance. As Bean explains, students’ motives for pursuing a degree may be conflicted because of the desire to represent their family and community members who were unable to attend college. To dismiss an essential part of one’s identity as under-theorized is arrogant—which working-class people like me can sense immediately.

We need to give students space to question their own cultures, literacies, and motives for attending college. Teachers can create reflective writing assignments inclusive of students’ lives that leave room for their analysis and interpretation. I am reminded of linguist Hartwell’s irascible critique of “dumb” theories about teaching literacy in which he combines academic scholarship with little stories as well as his own cranky vernacular language. Hartwell recommends that students’ development in first-year writing courses should come through participation in activities that are collaborative, personal, cooperative, comfortably paced, negotiated, and responsive to individuals (13-14). Hartwell demonstrates this type of learning by analyzing his own literacy experiences. Hartwell concludes that students be given the same “…little narrative space--for them to gain those insights for themselves” (16). Thus, students’ reflections about their experiences are key. The remaining sections offer an overview of experience-based assignments and details about reflective activities that create space for students’ analysis and representation.

Assignments that Analyze Experience

Park’s research with first-generation students of color documents that students can gain agency by making their writing more personal in content, perspective, and discourse. The three types of experience-based assignments that have been the most effective for my students are memoir essays, ethnographic research reports, and multigenre interview projects. These assignments begin with the writer’s unique experience whether it is remembered from the past, observed in a current context, or solicited in an interview. These firsthand experiences offer marginalized writers status in relation to their topics.

Marginalized writers need meaningful assignments that value their individual experiences and those of the people in their home communities. Eodice et al. surveyed and interviewed seniors at three universities about the qualities of meaningful writing assignments. Students specified that meaningful assignments provide: a topic of high interest and personal connection; engagement with content, peers, and instructors; a new and challenging experience; a link to previous knowledge; and relevance to the real world and future selves. Stinnett emphasizes the importance of students being able to connect their writing assignments to the leading psychological activity of identity formation. Memoir essays, ethnographic research reports, and multigenre interview projects create a personal connection through an emphasis on the writer’s experiences and cultural knowledge. By adding complex analysis to their writing, students gain a challenging new experience that considers past, present, and future influences upon their identity formation.

Memoir essays. Although most writing textbooks designate writing assignments by modes, I prefer using genre names. Students tend do better understanding assignments as genres rather than as modes of writing (Hall and Stephens). I refer to this assignment as memoir because it implies a more reflective stance and emphasizes the meaningfulness of the experience instead of merely chronological order. Robillard makes the point that this type of writing should actively seek to interpret a complicated experience rather than to report one completed static meaning (“It’s Time”). Literacy is probably the most frequently used topic in first year composition courses (Soliday; Williams; Bullock et al.; Wardle and Downs). Literacy is an effective topic because it relates directly to the activities that students will experience in a writing course. I began this assignment by having students explore their experiences inside and outside of school as well as how their family and neighbors used literacy in their daily lives. Eventually, I narrowed the literacy memoir assignment to be about an identity conflict (Mack, “From Literacy Narrative”). Students brainstormed a wide range of experiences when their language: made them feel like an insider or an outsider; was criticized by someone;
enabled them to take a stand or speak up for others; helped them to make peace with someone or inspired them to accept the views of someone else; was silenced because they felt different, ignored, or afraid. One student wrote about feeling like an outsider in his family while traveling on vacation. His father punished him for complaining by dropping him off at his grandparent’s trailer instead of going with the family to the beach. The only entertainment was a stack of vintage cowboy novels:

…the Native Americans that I was reading about were like me. They were hated by the white man; they were different than all those around them. Instead of being ashamed of themselves, they were proud. They were happy to be different; they loved and celebrated themselves and their differences. I seemed to soak up this attitude and started to realize that, while I was different, it was not something to be ashamed of, but rather something to be proud about.

This student’s empathy for the misrepresentation of Native American characters helped him to take pride in being a gay teen, another marginalized identity that many did not understand nor respect. This memoir created a complex juxtaposition between his humorous portrayal of the adults in his life and the teen’s deep frustrations with being misunderstood by all of them.

I have taught memoir courses with an identity theme. One course had graduate students write about experiences related to being, belonging, and becoming multiple identities (Mack, “Critical Memoir”). After considering how identity issues are culturally mediated through language and images, students traced their experiences related to their evolving awareness and ownership of a particular identity. Students examined their negative emotional reactions as an embodied barometer for subtle forms of oppression. Limit situations were analyzed for material constraints, social pressures, and institutional hierarchies. Finally, students created a manifesto for future thoughts, actions, and reactions to gain agency for achieving their goals.

**Ethnographic research reports.** Like the other assignments, ethnographic research emphasizes the writer’s experiences, but in this case the experiences are from recent observations of a social context. Students need background information for this type of assignment because they are unfamiliar with both ethnography as a research method and folklore as a discipline. *Fieldworking* is a classic textbook that presents many assignment topics and activities (Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater). Students in my first-year courses completed mini ethnographic participant-observation studies (Mack, “Writing for Change”). My working-class students chose social settings that were easily accessible in their daily lives such as where they worked, took their children, and shopped. Students took fieldnotes, kept a reflective process journal, and coded their notes for patterns. One student analyzed types of customers at Big Lots, a discount store, and another critiqued a power drama among workers in the deli department of a large grocery store. A student, who was a receptionist at a funeral home, analyzed what people said and how they behaved during their first requests for assistance.

My incarcerated students completed a study of slang words that resulted in dictionary entries with parts of speech and example usage sentences. Next, in groups or alone, they reported on folkways in prison related to medical care, black market stores, African American guards, etc. One group wrote about military veterans and paid an office clerk in cigarettes to type up the final report. Another group collected tall tales about the parole board that functioned as a dark humor warning for those new to prison. This is an excerpt from one of those stories:

As soon as he [the inmate] hit the chair, he was informed that he had not been given permission to sit because he would not be in there long enough; very much unnerved Max stood up. The only woman seated with the parole board that day then threw a small shiny object into the air. When it hit the ground, she asked Max to identify it. Max replied that it was a nickel. The woman then congratulated him on his perception and told him that they would see him after he stepped off another nickel, meaning five more years. When Max turned to leave, she told him: “By the way, we don’t want any change back.”
Each tall tale was introduced with background information and was followed with an analysis of the problems with the parole system that the tale exaggerated. Selecting social sites from their daily lives increases the meaningfulness of students’ analysis.

**Multigenre interview projects.** Interviews can be used in conjunction with ethnographic observations or as information for a research project. The experience of interviewing valued informants positions students to acquire knowledge about a meaningful topic. I used interviews in a multigenre writing course that had students create projects about family, community places, or local groups. Many discovered that parents or older adults told amazing stories that they had never heard. For example, students wrote about: a relative who was separated from his siblings and grew up in an orphanage, an organ-donor recipient notified during a remote camping trip, and a pair of runaway circus elephants in a rural cornfield. Honoring family members from previous generations for their military service was a popular topic for my students.

Students experimented with several different genres that made room to represent diverse points of view; two were chosen by me and three or more by them. They drafted poems, allegories, photo responses, and monologues. Two of the required genres were a narrative such as memoir, short story, or diary entries; and a formal genre such as a newspaper article, advice column, or psychologist report with quotes from academic sources. Students completed five genres; a works cited page; endnotes explaining their rhetorical decisions; and a cover essay about their research process and their topic’s significance. Students arranged the genres in an order of their choice with transitional images, brief genres, or quotes between their completed genres. The whole project was published in a creative way with graphics such as scrapbooks, keepsake boxes, or websites. The multigenre assignment took up half of the term.

The extended narrative genre was the centerpiece of the project. One project dramatized the experiences of military brats whose families are often transferred to several different bases. The student interviewed several other people who shared her experiences as a transient student. The following is an excerpt from her short story about problems during the first day at a new school.

“I’m Ms. Peterson! Tell the class your name and where you’re from!” She practically chirped at me, beaming. I quirked my lips into a forced smile and faced the class.

“Amelia Weathers. I go by Amy.” I paused here, hesitating. It’s hard to explain something that’s so ingrained in your lifestyle. “I’m not really from anywhere.”

A bit of a murmur went through the room. This wasn’t a school full of other brats, so I assumed most of them wouldn’t understand what I meant by not being from anywhere.

A brunette, long-haired guy broke the murmur with his question: “Where’re you from, then?”

“Texas. I’m not from there though. I was only there for three years…My mom is in the Air Force.” I wiped my palms surreptitiously on my thighs again.

“Where were you born then?” Another person asked, this time a redhead girl—natural, it looked like.

I gritted my teeth through this next answer: “California, but… I’m not from there either. I only lived there for a few months.” This conversation always went the same way, with the same annoying questions. Military kids were always on the news every time someone did something “adorable.” They had to know something about military life.

“Everyone is from somewhere! Isn’t there anywhere?” Ms. Peterson certainly was persistent.

“Everyone is not from somewhere. I’ve been a brat my whole life. I move every three years.
Nowhere has ever been home,” I snapped.

Using dialogue enabled the author to portray the main character’s anger with the assumptions held by both students and teachers. I encouraged students to use genres that permit emotional and/or critical points of view.

Students also enjoyed experimenting with a memoir in the voice of the subject of their project or a two voices poem. The two voices poems (Fleischman) enabled students to write two opposing perspectives about the same conflict similar to a counterstory (Martinez). My favorite example was written to honor a parent who was an unwed mother. One column represented a typical high school girl preparing for prom and the other side paralleled a teen preparing for the birth of her baby. Using multiple points of view about one issue or event allowed students to enact diverse values, interpretations, and subjectivities. The cover letter and endnotes even provided the opportunity for the authors to speak metacognitively about their experiences creating the project.

The assignment alone does not make the writing meaningful; the interactions with the teacher and peers help to make the experience significant. Jorgenson Borchert emphasizes that memoir and ethnography assignments can create an empathetic space where a meaningful emotional exchange among students and teachers can welcome difference and lead to opportunities for mentorship. Marginalized students need assignments that offer space for writing themselves into the university. The next two sections offer strategies for including analysis and home languages in students’ writing.

Activities for Complex Analysis and Interpretation

A problem with narratives is that society presents prepackaged interpretations that serve the status quo. Sometimes, it is nearly impossible to imagine a different interpretation of an experience. During my senior year of high school, I was a nervous wreck because I worried about going to college. Almost no one from my high school survived the first year of college let alone graduated. I could have bought into the narrative that I was an exception to the rule—smarter than my peers—but I knew otherwise. I had seen friends do better on many school assignments. I could not accept an identity as one of the few smart students at my school. The only narrative that I could construct for myself was to pick the school that a neighbor attended. If Frank from down the street survived college, maybe I could too. Counter narratives are important, but some of those only offer a marginalized position as the exception to the rule. Narrating school success as something only a few can do or as the result of individual grit may only serve to perpetuate marginality (Suh et al.). Writers can reflect on their cultural positionality to construct meaningful interpretations (Alcoff). This section promotes multiple reflective interpretations of a chosen experience to help students take agency in authoring meaning.

Some interpretations are easier to accept while others only seem right for a while—until they are cast off for a more complex analysis. Folklorist Shuman has hopes for dynamic situated stories that create: “…relationship[s] between the personal and the universal, the local narrative and the grand narrative, and the local claim and the universalized claim” (12). Individual narratives do not develop in isolation from the preferred narratives sanctioned by society. The experience of one person may be just a local bit of knowledge, but it is the relation to the privileged knowledge that needs to be put into question; and that relationship can be examined through scholarly analysis. Scholarly analysis must consider the uncomfortable narratives that have influence over how we view ourselves. Grue’s memoir about growing up with a genetic muscular disease describes his increasing awareness of the narratives that others had created for him (I Live). The negative narratives attributed his absence to declining health or his death. Grue also critiques the reductive narratives for people with disabilities as inspiration porn (“The Problem”). Whether negative or positive, rejected or accepted, interpretations are influenced by how the tale has already been told several times over. Rejecting a narrative for one’s life can be a sudden realization, a growing awareness, or a quiet reflection. Marginalized students can examine how writing can speak for both the singular and the collective as a form of resistance to systematic oppression (Espino et al.). As the title of Sommer’s often cited article
implies, knowledge can be created “Between the Drafts” when the authority of the interpretation can come into question. Writing slows down experience, and when the narrative is reinterpreted, the experience can be distanced so that it can be reconsidered with several different scholarly lenses. Flower describes this process as “…metacognitive analysis of some unrecognized interpretive frames at work in their [students’] own experience” (35). Emphasizing multiple scholarly lenses or interpretive frames, guides students to engage in deep analysis of sociohistorical contexts rather than limiting their analysis to common assumptions (Woody). Narratives of many types from literature to science are the subject of academic analysis; however, the narrative from one’s own life experiences may be the subject that merits the most rigorous analysis.

Once students have the sequence of events mapped out, I devote time to exploring multiple interpretations of their experiences before they draft or revise their writing. I structure the students’ reflections as a series of brief, timed responses to three analytic prompts selected from a list of five or more. Choice is important for students to assert their own complex interpretations of their or the narrator’s experience. The examples below illustrate the types of prompts I have offered for various assignments.

- **Time.** Explain what you were thinking just prior to this event. Include your general mood and specific worries at that time. Next, explain the fears and other thoughts that were going through your mind during the moment of crisis. Then, explain how you view the event now as being different or like other experiences that you have had.

- **Identity.** Select one of your identity groups from the list created in class and discuss how stereotypes about that identity influenced the event. Then select another identity unlike those that you accept and tell how someone with that identity might have had a different experience or reaction.

- **Values.** Select one value from the list created in class (honesty, kindness, independence, respect, etc.) and explain how that value influenced this event. Select a value that did not influence this event and explain how it might have changed what happened.

- **History.** Select a previous generation and tell how the common views held during that time would have changed what happened. Imagine life in a future decade and tell how those circumstances might change what happened.

- **Location.** List five or more words that describe the community where this event took place (urban, Midwest, America, etc.). Explain how the culture of that location influenced what did and did not happen. Select a very different cultural location and tell how that culture might have caused a different event or reaction.

- **Emotion.** List three or more emotions that were a response during this event (surprise, fear, anger, disappointment, etc.). Select two emotions from your list and describe how and why these emotions influenced the event. Select one or more extreme emotions that were not an influence and describe why you did not feel or react this way.
- **Agency.** Imagine that this event could happen to others from one of your identity groups. Explain how people in this group might organize to make sure that this event could be encouraged or prevented in some way.

- **Difference.** Imagine a type of person who would misunderstand this event. Explain the beliefs that this person might have that would make it difficult for them to understand or accept what happened.

The goal of these prompts was to problematize the interpretation of an experience by analyzing multiple types of influence. Harris describes this type of process as emergent moments when: “...the personal, the critical, and the rhetorical intersect in a text, a point at which the student can hold multiple perspectives simultaneously and reflexively” (403). Students are engaged in researching other ways that the story could be told. Stories are often told one way out of habit rather than as a conscious decision. This is why a narrative writing assignment has the potential to function as either a simple chronological retelling or as a complex analysis of identity formation. Acts of representation can provoke ethical decisions about whether the story has changed in meaning for the person who tells it now or how the narrative might function differently when told in an educational context (Nicholes; Suh et al.; Webb-Sunderhaus; Burgess and Ivanić).

Marginalized students are already adept at analyzing their life experiences—just not in their school writing. When I began emphasizing analysis, many students just tacked on a brief concluding paragraph summing up the meaning of the event. This formulaic structure may have been due to previous writing instruction. To encourage integrating analysis into their writing, students color-marked the analysis passages in a model narrative. Students found that analysis could be various lengths and located in multiple places. After the assignment was completed, many students responded that they were most proud of the improvements they made in analyzing the experiences represented in their writing. I would assert that this type of complex analysis is exactly what our colleagues across the university would value as a significant goal for a college education. Developing analytical skills is indicated within the Framework for Postsecondary Writing and the WPA Outcomes Statement for First-year Composition, neither of which specify a particular mode of discourse. The next section suggests another series of activities for the inclusion of students’ home languages as assets for writing as opposed to obstacles to overcome.

**Activities for the Validation of Home Languages**

Representing life experiences offers a fertile context for examining cultural differences. Rendon emphasizes the importance of faculty giving cultural validation to marginalized students during their first year of college. Making statements about academic language being no better or more correct than home language is not as inclusive as encouraging students to use their home languages in academic assignments. Students are competent and creative users of their home languages. Lu envisions the divide between academic and other discourses as “contested and constructed anew each time one writes” (“Writing” 20). Marginalized students are very aware that their language is a marker of difference and a potential site of conflict. Marginalized students need to construct their identities as academic writers within a problematic context. Perhaps we have been too idealistic in our assumptions about academic discourse habits. The academy is a hierarchical institution that promotes oppressive beliefs about language that at times borders on the ridiculous. Faculty can become overly concerned about minutia. As my inmate students have told me, academics make too big of a deal about dots and dots with tails.

Language bias is a larger issue than a conflict between two persons. Language conflicts are built upon systematic racism, classism, and sexism; and therefore, they deserve serious consideration about negotiating structural hierarchies in the academy (Inoue, *The Epistemology*). Guerra designates this approach as Critical
Language Awareness that helps “…all students navigate and negotiate the treacherous ideological waters they encounter in the college classroom and other communities” (29). Awareness of how language bias functions to support injustice is an important concept for all students to gain from a writing course (Gere et al.; Baez and Carlo). This section explains how including dialogue in experience-based writing can lead to discussions about language assessment, diversity in academic writing, and agency for representation.

**Language assessment.** One linguistic bonus from assignments based on students’ experiences is that embedding dialogue or quotes with vernacular language and languages other than English can improve their writing. Students already juggle multiple language resources and affiliations from participation in different social contexts (Guerra; Lu, “An Essay”). My requirement that they include dialogue or informal language provoked questions about indention, punctuation, spelling—and whether I would take off for intentional “errors.” Students wisely wanted assurance that I would not grade down for the use of vernacular language. For an antiracist pedagogy, Inoue advocates that assessment should be problematized as dynamic, changing, relational, and negotiated (Antiracist 189). We discussed code meshing and why accuracy in reported speech was important for aesthetic, ethical, and social justice reasons (Young, “Should Writers”). Students shared fears that other professors might take off for code meshing. I suggested that students could get out in front of this problem—as they did in our course—by asking how language differences would be evaluated. Other strategies were discussed such as end noting or using parentheses to document that vernacular language was intentional and not an error.

**Language diversity.** I followed up with an examination of how vernacular language and languages other than English can be included in academic writing by code meshing and translingualing/transculturaling (Guerra). I shared examples of my working-class idiolect in my publications. Then, students examined College Composition and Communication Conference programs to find examples of code meshing in the titles of sessions. Shapiro has excellent sociolinguistic activities, such as the analysis assignment of a novel, film, or television show (110-112). Academic authors innovate upon disciplinary language norms for intentional purposes (Tardy; Young, “Should Writers”). My students analyzed the rhetorical moves that academics make when they use vernacular language and languages other than English. Students enjoyed listing words from other languages that academics use to add status and expand meaning. Awareness of the richness of language diversity can be a type of rhetorical attunement that fosters an emergent sensitivity to language for both students and teachers (Higgins et al.; Leonard).

**Language agency.** Providing opportunities for home languages in academic writing may not seem like an act of social justice. However, I know that those moments were significant for me. Those words performed my anger, wit, upbringing, and integrity to an audience that contained only the fewest allies. For me it was about working class; for others it may be about race, ethnicity, gender, or sexuality. Young makes the point that “When we ask Black students to give up one set of codes in favor of another, their BEV [Black English Vernacular] for something we call more standard, we’re not asking them to make choices about language, we’re asking them to choose different ways to perform their racial identities through language” (Your Average 142). Identity functions powerfully through language in complex ways. Recent research demonstrates that students with diverse identities can use the strategic inclusion of tellable identity markers as an important act of rhetorical agency (Park; Tennant). Diversity without agency is not social justice (Ore et al.). Students can benefit from analyzing their agency in how language negotiates context, identity, and power (Park; Tennant; Shapiro et al.; Lu and Horner). Including home languages, discussing bias in assessment, and analyzing academic examples of code meshing/translingualing/transculturaling can create a context that respects students’ identities and provides experience with using language to promote agency.

**Conclusion**

Representation matters. I see posts from reading teachers about the importance of assigning diverse texts, but I worry about how diversity is represented in the writing assignments that we give. Do the writing
assignments create a meaningful space for marginalized students to represent themselves, their life experiences, and their home communities? Do our pedagogical activities foster analysis and complex representations that move beyond mere chronological retellings or stereotypical renderings? Are we prepared to listen to and respond to our students’ complex life experiences? Is the university willing to encourage diverse writers to take agency in what and how they write and use language? Admitting marginalized students to the university has caused changes in the past and will hopefully continue to do so in the future. Marginalized students bring a representation of the larger world and can contribute significant insights about their experiences both inside and outside of the insular academic community.

Notes

[1][#_ftnref1] Historically marginalized students can be of many, intersecting types: first-generation, BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, ESL, working-class, persons with disabilities, rural, incarcerated, older, and so on and may not even self-identify with these labels. It might be more appropriate to say that these are students who have been historically marginalized by society than the shorter form of “marginalized students” that I use in this article.

[2][#_ftnref2] In the past I aligned with critical pedagogy and like many scholars felt comfortable plopping critical in front of theory or pedagogy. Critical thinking has been so overused that it has become an empty signifier (Peckham). Currently, critical is a red flag—as in critical race theory—that inflames white middle and working-class folks who associate the word with blame and negativity. So, I have used asset pedagogy here in favor of a more positive public reception—although that does not imply affirmation without complex scholarly analysis.

[3][#_ftnref3] For more details about the project see Engaging Writers with Multigenre Research Projects (Mack). The examples of student work in the book, this article, and on both of these websites were included with consent from the students: http://www.nancymack.me/ and https://works.bepress.com/nancy_mack/.

[4][#_ftnref4] Research indicates that marginalized students feel distress related to their language differences, and in many cases that distress makes them feel unwelcome to the point that they drop out and do not come back (Adair; Dunstan and Jaeger; Eliason and Turalba). This feeling of being unacceptable is magnified in courses where students must speak and write (Penrose; White and Lowenthal).

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