

Teaching Life Writing: Theory and Textual Practice

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In this research about teaching life-writing, the authors would like to focus on different ways of demonstrating narratives about personal lives. Some established research articles and academic writings on autobiography and biography can be read as textual practices of methods for teaching narrating lives in the classroom. It is significant to read the literary texts as practices of narratives about different lives. The relations among the narrator (first person in terms of autobiography, third person in terms of biography), the text, and the theory/the method of writing, in a way, all come to show the readers the richness of different lives and how distinguish these narratives are.

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Introduction

Zachary Leader, in the “Introduction” to the book *On Life-Writing*, defines the term “life-writing” as a genre, which is “used to describe a range of writings about lives or parts of lives, or which provide materials out of which lives or parts of lives are composed” (Leader, 2015, p. 1). Inspired by Leader’s definition, in this research, the authors aim to read these articles as teaching guidelines, namely: “Grasping the Scope of Individual Human Devastation in War: Life Writing’s Place in Mapping in the Classroom” by Katherine Roseau and Kristen Bailey, “Care-Filled Classrooms: Heart (Art) Full Life Writing Pedagogy” by Gina Snooks, “On Teaching Life Writing in an Age of Social Change” by Orly Lael Netzer and Amanda Spallacci, Julie Rak’s “Life-Writing Research beyond ‘The Black Hole Effect’”, “‘Show and Tell’: The Risks and Rewards of Personal-Object-Based Learning” by Marina Deller, and the last but not the least, “Teaching, Trauma, Writing: The Truth’s Superb Surprise” by Tanis MacDonald.

Reading these teaching methods from the articles suggested above, in the class, among all the discussions, the authors would like to read a contemporary writer such as Orhan Pamuk, to interview a contemporary pianist Rueibin Chen, in order to show examples of how an interview in a form of conversation about life narratives can be done.

Humanity and Life Writing

In the scholar’s eyes, what does this genre life writing represent? In this article, “Life Writing Research beyond ‘The Black Hole Effect’”, Julie Rak comes to explain the way in which teachers and learners can avoid stepping into the “The Black Hole” (Rak, 2022, p. 386). The Black Hole metaphor, the authors would argue, refers to both concerns: firstly, a physical classroom or study room without a window. Secondly, without any

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luck, when one does the research, it may feel that the research subject is taking one's energy away, just like "Chris who wore a bow tie and a frayed blue suit jacket every day, and who said he had been working on his Communications Master's thesis for twelve years" (Rak, 2022, p. 386).

How to avoid this situation? Teaching and learning should not be a trap—just like a black hole. What shall we keep in mind, when it comes to teach stories about lives? To teach writings about lives is meant to be inspiring. In other words, through learning about life writing, students would be able to be inspired and to write their own stories. For learners and their teachers, to be able to write—not only just to read—this is equally important in a whole process of teaching.

In general, to teach skills such as reading and writing in English as a foreign language is still the main focuses in the classroom. Students would be asked to read the assigned articles before coming to the classroom. The over-all summaries of the content of the research articles are provided in the class. After that, there will be discussions which focused on key concepts—in the case of teaching life writing—such as life, narrative, and education.

For example, when we talk about "Grasping the Scope of Individual Human Devastation in War: Life Writing's Place in Mapping in the Classroom" by Katherine Roseau and Kristen Bailey, in the sixth week during the term time, it is essential to know that it is important to teach students about the individual experiences through different forms of personal writings, such as letters, diaries/personal journals, as the best writings would come from one's own heart.

During the Nazi occupation, in France, there was this person called "Isaac Schoenberg, an interned Jew" (Roseau & Bailey, 2022, p. 430), who was trapped in Paris but tried to use letters to contact his fiancé. As this writing subject—"Isaac"—narrated, the city of Paris was not only a place or a situation that he was in. Rather, it transformed from a name of a city to a projection to the hope for peace. As we read, Isaac wrote to his fiancé that, "[I]ast night, I had a beautiful dream! I was walking with you in Paris on the illuminated boulevards like in times of peace" (Roseau & Bailey, 2022, p. 430).

In many ways, the aim of reading into this person's letter, in a life writing classroom, is to shift the teaching focus from a basic understanding of a historical event (the Nazi Occupation) to an evaluation of their impact on a person's life (the separation of a couple). Paris was not only a "hostile place" (Roseau & Bailey, 2022, p. 429). More significantly, this city, for Issac, comes to define his own identity as a human being, as the city of Paris "symbolizes at once the past and the future" (Roseau & Bailey, 2022, p. 430) of this person, whose letter was read by all the students "in Dr. Katherine Roseau's spring 2020 course on Nazi-occupied France" (Roseau & Bailey, 2022, p. 429).

After the reading and the discussion about this article, in the classroom, several days later, the authors received a letter from a student from the class, expressing her gratitude to the teachers. In the letter, the student expresses her feeling towards this reading—"it is like a therapy" and "it means a lot to be"—as the student had overcome a "dark phase" of her life a few months ago. She feels that she can identify with Issac in order to understand his letter.

For the authors, to receive such a letter from a student means success. Apart from reading only the scholarly articles, the authors also use some other reading materials as examples. In order to make the students see the connection between different readings, the authors choose Orhan Pamuk after teaching this. In the article, "Show and Tell: The Risks and Rewards of Personal-Object-Based Learning", Marina Deller draws

inspirations from her “favorite school activity” when she was five years old—which was called “show and tell” (Deller, 2022, p. 419). This time, as the readers can see, it is not only the person he or she that has a story. Rather, the object that he or she owns does. But the main concern for the class, in terms of teaching life writing, would be: how to choose and what to tell. Just when Deller’s memory goes through the details—“[w]hich items held a story? What was curious, bright, brimming with adventure ... and might appeal to my peers” (Deller, 2022, p. 419)—she has this brilliant idea of using the same technique in her class of “life narrative to undergraduates” (Deller, 2022, p. 419).

The use of personal objects as a pedagogical approach in an undergraduate life writing course, for sure, can create a sense of “classroom intimacy—a sense of community, collaboration, and reciprocity between students and their peers, and students and their educators” (Deller, 2022, p. 419). As Deller reflects on her own learning experience from her childhood, there is still a gap between her childhood memory and the physical teaching practice in the classroom. The best way to overcome this gap is to bring in the sense of “hybrid literature/creative” writing (Deller, 2022, p. 420) into a “middle-sized” classroom, in a way in which “scholarly and creative readings about ‘material’ life narratives and personal archives” (Deller, 2022, p. 420) could be included.

For a better understanding of life writing, in this particular sense through a personal object, the authors choose Orhan Pamuk—his 2006 “My Father’s Suitcase: *The Nobel Lecture*” to be read and discussed in the class. This is an important article, in a way in which it serves to make us understand the meaning of a personal writing and a personal object in terms of teaching life writing.

As Pamuk stated, his father’s suitcase is a very important personal object. There are at least two levels of meanings representing by this object—one personal, and one professional. It is not only a father’s suitcase. Beyond the personal level, this little object, in which it “filled with” many “writings, manuscripts, and notebooks” (Pamuk, 2007, p. 405) could be seen as something significant for a writer-to-be.

Just as Deller asks her students: “What objects do you keep in your ‘boxes in the attic,’ in your ‘shoeboxes under the bed’” (Deller, 2022, p. 420)—it seems that the location of that personal object is also very important. As Pamuk’s father left him his suitcase two years before his death, “wandering back and forth like a man who wished to rid himself of a painful burden” (Pamuk, 2007, p. 405), the readers eventually can envision that personal object “in an unobtrusive corner” (Pamuk, 2007, p. 405) in Pamuk’s study. As the suitcase has the smell that Pamuk is familiar with—“the scent of cologne and foreign countries” (Pamuk, 2007, p. 405)—it is also a personal object, which serves as a reminder of Pamuk’s childhood memory. The “weight” (Pamuk, 2007, p. 405) of this memory does not only come from the notebooks and the manuscripts of Pamuk’s father that he composed those in Paris. Rather, it is a representation of the difficulty that a young man faced, when pursuing a literary dream “in a poor country with few readers” (Pamuk, 2007, p. 406).

To be a writer, as Pamuk insists, it will need “hope” and “faith” (Pamuk, 2007, p. 407) for someone to sit in a room “at the table and patiently turning inward” (Pamuk, 2007, p. 407). That person will have to be able to “have the artistry to tell his own stories as if they were other people’s stories, and to tell other people’s stories as if they were his own, for this is what literature is” (Pamuk, 2007, p. 409). Pamuk, too, who has been struggled on the way to achieve the literary success, chose to read those “biographies”—those forms of “life writing” (Pamuk, 2007, p. 411) of great writers such as Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, Thomas Mann, so on and so forth.

Moreover, Pamuk, as a young writer, tried to study the “oral storytelling traditions—of China, India, Persia” (Pamuk, 2007, p. 367), in a way in which his own narrative techniques for different forms of lives (as shown in his characters) would be able to develop in an authentic way. As a young man lived in Istanbul with a literary dream, like Pamuk himself used to be and his father were—these two father and son—come to remind the readers the importance of reading biographies and shaping a personal writing style from that, as a personal object is more than just an object.

Social Change and Life Writing

As readers and researchers, we should notice that there are different forms of narrating lives. In other words, life writing does not belong to only Kings or Queens. Rather, it belongs to everyone—as someone tells his or her own story, he or she becomes the voice in the narrative. In the article “Care-Filled Classrooms: Heart (Art) Full Life Writing Pedagogy”, Gina Snooks comes to explore the integration of autobiographical portraiture as a pedagogical strategy in life writing scholarship, with particular focuses on issues which are related to social justice and education.

Snooks comes to emphasize the importance of using arts-based practices to encourage critical thinking, so that students can develop their ability to make comments on issues which are related to “power, privilege, and oppression” (Snooks, 2022, p. 445). Moreover, as learners come to try to focus on the key concepts which are stated above, it also creates an opportunity for students to examine their own situations with a perspective of “a student-centric pedagogy” (Snooks, 2022, p. 446). This article also discusses the ethical responsibility of educators to be attentive to the ways trauma can affect students and the need to create care-filled classrooms that foster deep engagement and critical dialogue, as Snooks highlights the concept of “teaching with tenderness” (Snooks, 2022, p. 446). The sense of an ongoing critical reflection and the willingness to adapt teaching methods come to serve in a better way, in terms of telling personal stories.

As Snooks goes for a student-centered approach in the classroom, a sense of caring more about the learners would be profoundly emerged, in terms of sharing experiences of personal trauma and related issues through story-telling in both visual (words) and verbal (sketches, photos, etc.) forms. There is a good reason for using visual images in the classroom—as for the learners, it is easier and quicker for sharing their emotional status among the classmates, in order to feel and to care about the narratives. In so doing, the importance of creating a sort of “care-filled” (Snooks, 2022, p. 449) classroom would be really possible. As the learners try to tell their own stories by visual images which are about their life stories, in a way, the demonstration of “human dignity” (Snooks, 2022, p. 449) in the classroom will be more powerful.

In this article, “On Teaching Life Writing in an Age of Social Change”, Orly Lael Netzer and Amanda Spallacci come to bring focus on Saidiya Hartman’s view on the importance of autobiography as a genre. Different research “topics such as identity, memory, history, representation, and agency” (Netzer & Spallacci, 2002, p. 325) will be having more “interdisciplinary” (Netzer & Spallacci, 2002, p. 325) possibilities, as Netzer and Spallacci come to suggest, if life writing could be seen “as a method rather than a static object of study” (Netzer & Spallacci, 2002, p. 326).

According to Netzer and Spallacci, “the pedagogy of autobiography in academic and community settings” (Netzer & Spallacci, 2002, p. 326) is significant. As the importance of teaching life writing is established in the mind of scholars, it is more likely to connect teachers and learners to the “network of historical, social, cultural, ideological, and material systems and to consider how we encourage students to think about knowledge as

reciprocal, ethical, and a means of mobilizing social justice” (Netzer & Spallacci, 2002, p. 326). As the educators realize the significance of integrating life writing into pedagogy, a space for conversation is possible in the context of a classroom.

As the authors are inspired by all these readings and all different teaching methods about life writing as a genre, we also want to try something new, in terms of making some contributions to narrative forms which are related to trauma. In the article “Teaching, Trauma, Writing: The Truth’s Superb Surprise”, as Tanis MacDonald explores the intersection of teaching, trauma, and writing in the context of a creative writing classroom, the authors also want to encourage students to express themselves through traumatic experiences, through writing, especially, as students come to recognize how a traumatic experience can empower one to re-organize one’s own self, in order to explore the “truth” (MacDonald, 2022, p. 437) in a way that the American female poet Emily Dickinson tried to understand her own experience. In other words, in a classroom of teaching life writing, it is essential to give permission to students to explore in words those were “not allowed” (MacDonald, 2022, p. 438). The authors are grateful again, to receive a writing from a student in the class. This student’s writing is more like a style of “automatic writing” (Baldick, 2008, p. 30), which flows between the conscious and “the unconscious mind” (Baldick, 2008, p. 30) as he told the authors. The writing is about a traumatic experience. The first person narrator “I” has many doubts throughout the writing, expressing the emotion of fear, and asking “what should I do with them”. A traumatic experience may come in one’s life, but it does not come to define a person as loser. There is no need to feel ashamed.

Conclusion

These articles we read and discussed in the classroom showcase the interdisciplinary nature of life writing, seamlessly weaving together strands of social justice education, human geography, creative writing. The integration of personal narratives serves as a potent tool for exploring complex issues such as power dynamics, privilege, oppression, and historical events. A recurrent theme throughout the articles is the emphasis on embodied and visual methods in teaching life writing. Whether through the nuanced lens of autobiographical portraiture, or the tangible exploration of personal objects, the authors of these academic research articles show the readers the significance of connecting students with the physical and sensory aspects of writing, memory, and self-expression.

The interactions and discussions in the classroom come to encourage ongoing critical reflection and a willingness to adjust teaching methods to better serve students. In conclusion, these articles contribute to a comprehensive understanding of life writing pedagogy, underscoring the dynamic interplay of interdisciplinary perspectives, ethical considerations, embodied practices, inclusivity, adaptability, trauma-informed teaching, and the transformative impact of technology on the teaching and learning experience. The collective wisdom expressed in these articles forms a nuanced and holistic framework for engaging students in the profound exploration of life narratives.

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