Paul H. Elovitz, PhD*, taught at Temple, Rutgers, and Fairleigh Dickinson universities and currently teaches at a liberal arts college. He may be contacted at cliospsycheeditor@ gmail.com.* ❑

Stories of Survival: Writing through Trauma in the First-Year Composition Classroom

Katy D'Angelo—Anne Arundel Community College

Abstract: As a teaching tool, I am interested in how the study of survival narratives can promote a shift in the understanding of trauma through both individual and group psychology; in turn, students in a first-year writing course can use this approach to deepen their academic research and writing. In this article, I offer the example of a course I taught on survival narratives, in which students explored writing as a tool to work through trauma and silence as a means of promoting social change.

Keywords: growth-mindset, Native-American-communities, perseverance, psychoanalytic-insight, psychology, rhetoric-based-inquiries, survivance

For two years, I taught a first-year composition course titled, "Composition and Literature: Stories of Survival and Perseverance." The course was themed around readings related to trauma and survival and grounded in Gerald Vizenor's concept of "survivance" in his 1999 literary study of Native American literature, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance*. Enacted through storytelling, survivance provides more than stories of survival; by using language to manifest traditions and customs long-oppressed or even erased, survivance helps victims recover the voices and experiences lost through trauma. As a method of responding to trauma, survivance invited students to view writing as a form of resistance; more so, it permitted them to view their personal traumas as valid starting points for academic conversation.

As we read first-person survival narratives, students responded in informal journals and drew connections to their own lives, similar to Jeffrey Berman's groundbreaking method in *Risky Writing: Self-Disclosure and Self-Transformation in the Classroom* (2002) of using psychoanalytic diaries as a starting point for academic writing and research. Although students were not required to share their journal responses with the class, many did, and their acts

of sharing added seriousness and purpose. Painful experiences became stories to be reclaimed in the telling; research and writing offered the potential for personal and social change. The syllabus read, "In your culminating research essays, you will take up research projects that promote your own acts of 'survivance' in response to contemporary issues or experiences you have survived. You will engage in a scholarly process of reflection, research, and argumentation that can serve to promote cultural transformation and healing."

It was certainly an ambitious concept for a first-year composition course. As I considered whether the final projects fulfilled these aims, I was often impressed by the range of topics students (who were not Native Americans but could identify with struggles against marginalization) chose to research: inequities in the Native American health care system; high rates of violence and sexual assault in Native American communities; the impact of trauma related to gun violence; recent increases in depression and suicide; the challenges of burnout and addiction among health care professionals; the efficacy of addiction treatments, particularly in light of the opioid crisis and PTSD; and responses to sexual assault on college campuses.

Yet, I don't mean to suggest that all of these research projects were successful in reflecting students' mastery of course outcomes. Many essays failed to reflect college-level standards of research and citation, evidence-based argumentation, academic structure, and even Standard English conventions. To put it bluntly, some of the students who wrote the memorable essays mentioned above did not end up passing the course. Many of those who passed showed evidence of emerging skills but would likely still struggle with college writing. Composition, after all, involves a complex set of skills that are challenging to master in one 15-week semester.

With so much attention in education today focused on outcomes, instructors must continually assess and re-assess curricular and pedagogical practices; when students fail, we are invited to consider how our own instructional techniques or pedagogical philosophies are contributing to these outcomes. Are we doing enough? What can we do better? Yet, this micro-attention to skills-based, course-level outcomes often misses larger objectives that, if I'm being honest, remain central to why I am teaching today. Is my role in the classroom to help students write well-structured academ-

ic essays or enact a critical process that may help them reframe their individual psychohistories? While these objectives need not conflict, recent trends in the composition classroom often make them so. Can I claim "success" when I see students gain a new perception of their own experiences through exposure to the experiences of others or develop empathy and understanding about the complex histories that lie beneath trauma and inequality, even when they don't end the class writing about these topics well? Are these outcomes not just as valuable, albeit somewhat harder to measure?

Teaching at an open-access college puts me in contact with a range of non-traditional students, many of whom are more likely to have experienced trauma, marginalization, and psychological distress. Whether related to socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, mental health, first-generation or immigrant status, military service, or family and caregiving responsibilities, my students often bring complex histories of trauma into the classroom. In turn, they exemplify other educational concepts often discussed in tandem with trauma: grit and resilience. For many of my students, their traumas are recent and active. These students are still in the process of overcoming or making sense of the trauma's aftermath in their lives. They will persevere, educational research tells us, when they feel a sense of belonging to the academic community and see the value of these academic pursuits in their lives. (I am relying here on Stanford psychologist Carol S. Dweck's well-known 2007 work on the growth mindset, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, as well as the June 2012 report, "Teaching Adolescents to Become Learners: The Role of Noncognitive Factors in Shaping School Performance," by Camille A. Farrington and her colleagues at the University of Chicago Urban Education Institute.) Students often persist despite their challenges; in fact, I would argue many persist because of them. In this way, helping students integrate their unique psychological histories into their academic experience can help them foster an academic self that comes out of—rather than develops separately from—other parts of their lives.

My experiences teaching "Stories of Survival and Perseverance" bring these ideas out. Semester after semester, I had students tell me the course meant something to them, beyond just the acquisition of composition credit—and sometimes even despite the failure to acquire it. One student who had to withdraw mid-semester due to a health crisis wrote me a note to thank me for the class,

reporting, "I'm already finding so much use for these ideas in my life." Another student, who enrolled in the course amidst the ending of a seven-year relationship, told me later, "I thought it was fated when I learned the course theme on the first day. Your class was the only thing keeping me focused that semester, even as my life was falling apart."

In an online version of the class, one student announced in her course introduction that she had just lost her baby, which had been born several months early. A month removed from that trauma, she knew she needed to put her grief into something else and hoped our course readings would help her do that. In her peers' responses, two other women voiced immediate support—one a mother who had lost a child nearly a decade before; the other a young woman who had suffered a series of miscarriages and was also struggling. While all three women did not end up finishing the course (one wrote a thoughtful research essay on the systemic abuse in the foster care system), I believe the exchange provided a powerful example of how learning can foster empathy, community, reflection, understanding, and ultimately, growth.

In Fall 2019, the curriculum in my department changed. Following national trends, the curriculum shifted from an approach to composition achieved by writing about literature to an entirely rhetoric-based approach. Whereas previously the pedagogical approach was aimed at guiding students to respond to texts in any way that fostered analytical and critical engagement, including psychoanalytic insight and the gaining of personal agency, students must now approach all reading endeavors through the lens of rhetorical analysis. Reading a text, even a novel, became an exercise in various methods of rhetorical dissection, unpacking a text's purpose, audience, context, and conventions.

Students stared at me all semester with a stance of skeptical distance, even disdain. They didn't understand what these rhetoric-based levels of "inquiry" were asking or how to use them to better understand the things they read. While previously I would have invited students to respond to the ideas that emerged from a novel or memoir we read—and, often, in deeply personal ways—I was now asking them to dissect the text using a different set of terms that did not invite a human connection. There was no place for students to enter the texts and stand inside them to reemerge changed from the experience, enhanced in the literal sense.

All of this, inevitably, trickled back to my relationship with them, the teacher-student charge powering every classroom. Rather than being the caring guide who fosters a sense of belonging and mentors students through the complex project of learning, I was suddenly a stern voice asking questions they didn't know how to answer and failing to explain the steps. Further, the methods offered no personal pay-off, no application to the daily renegotiation of concepts like grit and resilience that many of my students face. I used to promote their reading journals by saying, "This connection you find in a book, it's just for you. It's what you take for you. Twenty years from now you may think back to something you read and you will understand it, suddenly, anew. Or you may find that an idea you read in this class set your life in a whole new direction because you were changed. The idea changed you and changed the way you saw the world."

This semester, I didn't have many such moments of inspiration. The lack of sharing had impacted the level of trust between me and my students, and I noticed more resistance to learning. In-class discussions were often forced, and my end-of-semester course evaluations came as little surprise. "She was very cold and didn't seem to enjoy her students," one student commented. Another said: "She needs to be more compassionate and understand her students' struggles to get them the help they need. I suggest going off-topic once in a while so you get to know your students, and then adjusting your teaching based on your students' needs. Rather than following a strict curriculum and taking no responsibilities for the failure rate in the class."

I taught the course at the center of these evaluations within the same calendar year as "Stories of Survival and Perseverance"; I am the same instructor and approach my students with the same level of openness. Yet students in these two classes did not perceive me in any similar way. In personal reflections, I have critiqued my practices in many ways, feeling enormous responsibility for the outcomes in my classroom. Yet still, I remain concerned about the broader trend in college writing classrooms toward largely rhetoric-based methods, which, coupled with accelerated curriculums, lead to the exclusion of other pedagogical methods and perspectives. Of course, no single method will facilitate the needs of all students. However, those students who have survived or are still amidst trauma may benefit from having an academic structure through which to reflect and write about it.

***Katy D'Angelo, PhD, MFA**, is an Assistant Professor of English at Anne Arundel Community College. She received her MFA from SUNY Binghamton and her PhD from Maryland University with a specialization in American poetry. She was affiliated with the composition program at Trinity College and Georgetown University where she worked in student development. Her poetry has appeared nationally in journals such as the North American Review, Poetry Quarterly, and Paterson Literary Review.*

She can be reached at kdangelo@gmail.com. ❑

Engaged, Not Curious: Teaching Therapeutic Writing Online

Reinekke Lengelle—Athabasca University

Abstract: Teaching therapeutic writing online is made possible by facilitating a safe space for personal expression. This article offers recommendations for working with students as they explore personal topics. Students will inevitably write about painful experiences and they require compassionate attachment and restraint on the teacher's curiosity so they can choose whether to disclose anything personal.

Keywords: curiosity, disclosure, engagement, personal-development, safe -space, self-reflection, therapeutic-writing

I have been teaching writing for personal development online for over 24 years and have taught therapeutic writing face-to -face as well. I am not a counselor, nor a psychoanalyst, though I am aware and informed by various psychological principles and processes.

Teaching writing online was the result of having no fear in using a computer and having a keen interest in people, narrative, and well-being. My father had handed me a copy of Alice Miller's *The Drama of the Gifted Child* (1979) when I was 15 years old because he wanted to discuss it. As a result of our conversations, I realized early on that most people repress or hide parts of themselves to survive within their families. I was no exception, only I was aware of the dynamics and had a father who encouraged me to disagree with him.

He said I would need to complete four different things to have a good start in life: a driver's license, a typing diploma, a uni-