From Private to Public: Narrative Design in Composition Pedagogy

Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

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2011

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“From Private to Public: Narrative Rhetoric in Composition Pedagogy” argues for a rhetorical revision of narrative in composition studies. Informed by the interdisciplinary narrative turn, this project aims to move past counterproductive debates surrounding ‘personal’ writing in order to attend to the rhetorical nature and uses of narrative. To this end, I draw upon a year’s worth of classroom-based qualitative research at The Ohio State University in which students analyzed and composed autobiographical texts in multiple genres and modes. Based on this research, I suggest that narrative rhetoric offers an ethical, dialogic orientation toward communication with significant benefits for composition pedagogy and promise for public use.

The introductory chapter establishes the exigency offered by the narrative turn and suggests that composition studies has an opportunity to redress a neglect of production in these conversations. I then briefly rehearse the history of personal writing in composition studies, wherein scholars and teachers have debated the merits of narrative in terms of student-centered pedagogies, academic discourse, and critical consciousness. Without diminishing the value of these conversations, I suggest that they have resulted in a terministic screen that emphasizes psychological and personal concerns to the relative neglect of the
rhetorical uses of autobiographical composition. To more fully attend to the richness of narrative communication, I propose an alternative set of terminology gleaned from humanistic and social scientific rhetorical theories of narrative. This narrative communication model becomes both a heuristic for analysis and heuretic for production of multimodal narratives in the composition classroom.

Building upon this foundation, the three case studies approach autobiographical narrative through different genres and modes. In the course documented in Chapter 2, students analyzed and composed graphic memoirs, examining comics’ capabilities for representing an author’s layered identity and perspective while demanding the active engagement of the audience. Chapter 3 engages the hybrid genre of autobiographical documentary, a process that complicated students’ epistemological assumptions and highlighted the ethical issues that attend narrative representation. The course under discussion in Chapter 4 considered the potential of literacy narratives for fostering students’ informed engagement in public discourses and furthering composition studies’ public turn. In each of these chapters, students’ critical framing and resulting compositions guide my developing argument about the affordances and constraints of a rhetorical approach to narrative in composition pedagogy.

The final chapter returns to my original questions—How does narrative rhetoric work? and What are the implications for composition studies?—to consider students’ contributions to these investigations. Ultimately, I suggest, we are in the midst of a kairotic moment for both composition and narrative studies,
one that calls for critical, creative approaches to narrative design in the service of productive communication.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I offer my whole-hearted gratitude to the students who have made this project possible. Their generous collaboration and innovative narrative designs have been a constant source of inspiration. If this experience has taught me anything, it’s how much we stand to learn by listening to and laughing with students. They have made this experience a true pleasure.

I would also like to thank my adviser, Dr. Kay Halasek, for her support and friendship in these past five years (and those to come) and for making this career choice seem reasonable, rewarding, and fun. Likewise, Dr. James Phelan and Dr. Cynthia Selfe have offered encouragement and productive critique while modeling tireless collegiality. I’d like to thank the Department of English community at OSU, especially Dr. Beverly Moss, Dr. Scott Lloyd DeWitt, Dr. Harvey Graff, Dr. Frank Donoghue, Dr. James Fredal, Dr. Kelly Bradbury, Dr. Michael Harker, Shawn Casey, Timothy Jensen, and Amy Spears for all they’ve taught me about being a scholar and colleague. In addition, I am grateful to Dr. Patricia Sullivan at the University of Colorado Boulder for introducing me to composition and rhetoric at exactly the right moment and helping me find my way into the field. And a very special thanks to Team Harlot for making grad school more rewarding and productive than it probably should have been.
I’d like to acknowledge the invaluable support of the Susan L. Huntington Dean’s Distinguished University Fellowship, as well as the programs and departments at Ohio State that made my research and writing possible: Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies, Center for the Study and Teaching of Writing, Project Narrative, Digital Media Project, Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives, Literacy Studies @ OSU, and Digital Media and Composition Institute.

And finally, many thanks to the friends and family who have kept me sane and healthy all these years—especially my mother, who knew this would happen long before I did, and my father, who would have loved to (finally) call me “Doctor.” I am beyond grateful for the support offered by Margie, Dan, Vic, Meghan, Jill, Brian, Christina, Andy, and Christen, among many others. And most of all, I am thankful to and for Chris Lindemann, my partner and friend, for his love, kindness, and patience. We did this.
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Fields of Study

Major Field: English
Minor Field: Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies
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CHAPTER 1: Introduction: (Re)Turning to Narrative in Composition Pedagogy

1.1 Prologue

This is a narrative about narrative. Or rather, about many overlapping narratives: disciplinary, pedagogical, personal, and rhetorical. The frame story I construct weaves the rich history of personal writing within composition studies into the cross-disciplinary narrative turn in order to develop a critical, production-oriented pedagogy of narrative rhetoric. The embedded stories I share are those gathered from a year of classroom research, the results of my own and students’ theory-driven experiments designing multimodal autobiographical narratives. Responding to the rising profile of narrative in academic and popular discourse, this dissertation works to revise composition’s traditional use of personal writing in the interests of rhetorical multiliteracy. Although narrative assignments have been employed and debated for much of composition’s disciplinary history, an historical overview suggests a reliance on expressivism, psychology, and identity politics that tends to overwhelm considerations of audience and purpose. As a result, composition studies has not yet tapped all available means of narrative persuasion.

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1 When I refer to composition studies, I mean the contemporary field sometimes referred to as composition and rhetoric or, as at the Ohio State University, rhetoric, composition, and literacy studies—a field of study employing diverse methodologies and pedagogies in order to explore and teach multiple literacies, media, and uses of communication.
This research was initially prompted by two general questions—*How does narrative rhetoric work?* and *What are the implications for composition studies?* The partial, preliminary response offered here reflects the specific prompts that have guided my project: How have students been taught to read and compose autobiographical narratives? What concepts and approaches might contribute to a productive narrative rhetoric? How might a rhetorical approach to narrative contribute to students’ learning and to composition studies as a whole? In pursuing that final question, I arrived at another that has shifted the terms and stakes of this research: What can students’ multimodal designs contribute to our understanding of narrative rhetoric in public discourse? The answers presented here are based on a series of courses in which students analyzed and composed autobiographical narratives in various genres and media. The results demonstrate that a critical approach to narrative composition can offer students and teachers a vehicle for pursuing the goals of transferable rhetorical perspective, ethical consciousness, and the complex multiliteracies necessary to engage effectively in public spaces. Moreover, students’ rhetorical designs promise to contribute to ongoing investigations of the affordances and constraints of multimodal narrative. The resources generated through this project, my own and students’, thereby work toward a generative praxis of narrative rhetoric with potential application within and beyond composition studies.

1.2 The Narrative Turn

I begin by setting the scene for this research narrative in the multiple, overlapping contexts that have shaped it and that it aims to shape in turn. The strategic use of narrative is a rare common thread among discussions of entertainment, politics, business,
activism, and education. In public discourses, nonfiction narratives are enjoying a moment; from reality television and best-seller lists to political campaigns and advocacy work, performances of personal identity and experience have become a mainstay of public rhetoric. Within academic settings, the study of narrative has crossed traditional borders, highlighting the epistemic and rhetorical power of storytelling and strengthening connections among disciplines. This “narrative turn,” building for years in isolated fields, has become a conversational space in which seemingly disparate scholars find their work validated and complicated by unexpected links. 

Whether conceived as an object or mode of inquiry, the study of narrative has illuminated common concerns in the humanities and social sciences and, increasingly, reaches into areas like medicine, law, and business. As the introduction to the landmark *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* notes, “stories have come to be viewed as a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process, and change—a strategy that contrasts with, but is in no way inferior to, ‘scientific’ modes of explanation that characterize phenomena as instanced of general covering laws” (Herman, Jahn, & Laure-Ryan, 2005, p. ix). Long associated with ‘the folk,’ marginalized groups, and everyday discourse, narrative has achieved scholarly stature, becoming a locus for examining the human condition from a variety of angles. It’s an exciting time for those of us interested in narrative studies, and we are, apparently, legion.

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3 For just a glimpse of these diverse treatments of narrative, see Brooks & Gewirtz, 1996 on law; Czarniawska & Gagliardi, 2003 on organization theory; Denning, 2003 on business leadership; Mullan, Ficklen, & Rubin, 2006 on health care policy; and Ricci, 2011 on politics.
Like most identifications, however, this “we” implies division as well, and not just between those who study narrative and those who don’t. The narrative turn, for all its rich diversity, revolves around interpretation and thereby subtly marginalizes questions of production. A few examples will suffice to demonstrate this analytic bias. Designed as a “universal reference tool” for narrative studies broadly conceived, Routledge’s ambitious encyclopedia is a testament to both the expansive vision of scholarship on narrative and its blind spot. The editors’ claim for its comprehensive reach is belied by the immediate restatement of its mission to provide a “comprehensive overview of paradigms for analysing stories” (Herman, Jahn, & Laure-Ryan, 2005, p. ix, emphasis added).

Likewise, the Ohio State University’s own Project Narrative (2011) “highlights the importance of developing an integrative, interdisciplinary approach to narrative… draw[ing] on multiple traditions of research—rhetorical and literary theory, ethics, cognitive science, linguistics, ethnic studies, queer theory, and comparative media studies—to analyze how narratives are told and interpreted” (n.p., emphasis added).

Martin Kreiswith’s (2000) long-term cross-disciplinary research project, “Narrative between the Disciplines,” examines the causes and consequences of all this attention:

Since the narrativist turn, we seem to be more interested in narrative’s representational status and what claims can be made for it… not just better to understand, appreciate, or evaluate stories or to learn how they might be related to our lives or to other forms of discourse but because the problems that they address have serious implications for the basic ways in which we order and evaluate knowledge and human action. (p. 296, emphasis added)
Whereas work on narrative outside of research settings is often oriented toward practice, academic treatments tend to remain focused on interpretation. The scholarly narrative turn has neglected an equivalent attention to the composition of narratives as rhetorical acts, the idea that all of these narrative heuristics might have value for creation as well as criticism. For all the power attributed to the well-told tale, surprisingly little scholarly work has sought to harness that rhetorical potential, to translate interpretation into production. As Jerome Bruner points out, “In contrast to our vast knowledge of how science and logical reasoning proceed, we know precious little in any formal sense about how to make good stories” (1986, p.14). If scholars seek to understand the complex workings of narrative, emphasis on interpretation should be balanced by attention to production; this work demands a translation of narrative analysis into narrative practice.

1.3 Composition’s Turn

And that is where composition studies come in. The narrative turn (or perhaps more accurately, dominant representations of it) has focused almost exclusively on reading, decoding, interpreting, without a balancing attention to writing, encoding, producing. This gap, I suggest, is one that contemporary composition studies is uniquely positioned to fill—if, that is, we can negotiate our own disciplinary history with narrative and build upon those strengths. Because just as the narrative turn has neglected the matter of composition, composition studies has perhaps neglected the narrative turn. This may

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4 See, for example, the Frameworks Institute (2011) or the Center for Digital Storytelling (2011).

5 A recent exception is Nita Schechet’s (2005) Narrative Fissures, which includes a section that “outlines directions for reflexive writing” of ethnography and ethnographic fiction (p. 24). Schechet addresses “the ethnographer’s craft, on reading informant’s narrative and writing the ineluctably interpretive metanarrative” in order “to expose [the narrative’s] own rhetoric to its reader’s scrutiny and to arouse its reader to active engagement with the text” (p. 85, 86). Her recommendation for ethical ethnographic writers is to resist closure and thereby encourage audience participation in final meaning-making, but strategies for accomplishing this remain implicit.
seem a counter-intuitive statement, given the long-standing and popular variations of the ‘personal narrative’ assignment that have marked writing courses for more than a century, as well as the now-commonplace attention to scholarship as storytelling. Nevertheless, as I will demonstrate, these negotiations have resulted in a terministic screen that, even as it validates scholarly narratives, offers a reductive perspective on its uses in the classroom and beyond. If we are to take full advantage of narrative’s rhetorical and pedagogical potential, an essential step must be revising our theoretical lens and, therefore, practice.

The narrative turn has demonstrated the central roles played by narrative in shaping individual and communal identities, making and communicating meaning, and influencing public discourses. It has also suggested narrative’s status as “the most powerful form of persuasion” (Brockmeier & Harré, 2001, p. 41). These claims challenge composition studies to move our discussion of students’ autobiographical writing beyond conventional treatments of personal narrative toward an understanding of rhetorical narrative as a powerful force. (As I explain further in section 3, although all narratives may be rhetorical, I use “rhetorical narratives” throughout to refer to those designed and deployed as purposeful acts in public spaces.) In the service of such revisions, I offer below a brief historical overview of composition studies’ dominant treatments of narrative and the debates that continue to shape current work. After situating this project’s goals within the concerns of contemporary pedagogy, I outline the narrative communication model that I suggest can help redefine composition’s relationship with narrative. Finally, the conclusion to this introduction provides the organizational scheme
that structures each chapter and points toward the major findings that emerge within and across these embedded research narratives. But first, some backstory.

2. A History of Narrative in Composition Studies

In composition studies, as in so many discursive arenas, narrating the past becomes essential to navigating the future. To situate this project, I consider the place of narrative in some of the central eras/movements in composition’s history. This overview begins with a brief discussion of the current-traditional model, of which the narrative mode was a cornerstone, that marked college writing pedagogy from its inception throughout the early development of the field. As current-traditionalism receded from the emerging discipline of composition, personal narratives became associated with expressivist models of pedagogy. And as expressivism, in its turn, fell from favor, narrative has been yoked to identity politics and cultural studies, concerns that continue to dominate recent discussions. My account cannot address the immense body of work in composition that includes attention to narrative, but even these broad strokes highlight the gap this research project works to fill. Within pedagogical theory and practice, narrative writing has often been treated as an exercise without exigency, valuable in many ways but divorced from more rigorous concerns of academic discourse, rhetorical criticism, and, more recently, multimodal composition. The result is a Burkean terministic screen, a filter that directs our attention but also limits our vision:

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6 By designating current-traditionalism and expressivist as “fallen” from favor, I refer to their status in theory and research; I do not mean to imply that these approaches are no longer influential in practice (Berlin, 1988; Silva, 1990; Crowley, 1998; Lauer, 2003).

7 In the interests of focus, I do not engage here discussions about the personal essay and creative nonfiction, both of which have generated overlapping debates and merit further discussion in connection to the work presented here. See, for example, Haefner, 1992; Spellmeyer, 1989, 1993; Hesse, 1989, 1994; Heilker, 1996; and Bishop, 2003.
composition’s relationship with narrative is defined by the vocabulary of personal and self and identity and reflection and consciousness, language that reflects the prevalence of social psychological perspectives in this history and that constrains the use of narrative to these ends. To sharpen the pedagogical use of narrative, I go on to suggest, that lens should be expanded and refined through the complementary views of rhetorical theories of narrative, those informants that emphasize the performative, persuasive construction of narrative texts as acts of communication.

2.1 Current-Traditional Approaches to Narrative

For the sake of this account, I begin my account at the accepted, if slippery, origin of the discipline of composition in the United States: just before the turn of the last century, as the 1862/1890 Morrill Acts expanded opportunities for higher education, universities recognized the need for a foundational writing course. Drawing directly (if selectively) from the rhetorical tradition, composition instruction of the time—what has come to be known as current-traditionalism—focused on the standard modes of discourse (narration, description, exposition, and argument) formalized by Alexander Bain and others in early composition textbooks (Young, 1978; Berlin, 1987, 1988; Connors, 1996; Crowley, 1998). In the classical rhetorical tradition, narration referred broadly to recounting events and information pertinent to the issue under discussion; it therefore included strategic selection and logical organization as well as character and plot (D’Angelo, 1984). By the time the modes became categories for writing assignments, however, the meaning of narration had become more restricted to relating a series of events. Drawing upon students’ personal experiences also became commonplace at this time; narration, then, became the mode in which students composed formulaic stories
about their experiences in support of a moral theme, usually as an introductory exercise en route to more sophisticated argumentation (Connors, 1987). However formulaic its application, narrative occupied a prime position in current-traditionalism; as one the four primary modes of discourse, it was a cornerstone of rhetoric instruction, a status it has not been afforded since.

Current-traditionalism dominated composition pedagogy throughout the first half of the twentieth century and lingered much longer. After the establishment of Conference on College Composition and Communication in 1949, as the discipline gained ground as a scholarly enterprise, this paradigm lost favor. The New Rhetoric was expanding the way scholars and teachers conceived of influence (Corbett, 1965; Larson, 1968); meanwhile, cognitive research on writers’ processes refuted the idea that composition could be taught as simple adherence to rules of grammar and form (Emig, 1971; Flower & Hayes, 1981). In this climate of change, current-traditional pedagogies and the modes they relied upon were deemed prescriptive, stifling, and counterproductive to students’ critical thinking and creativity (Young, 1975; Berlin & Inkster, 1980; Knoblauch & Brannon, 1984; Crowley, 1990; Bizzell, 1990). The move away from the modes of discourse did not mean a wholesale rejection of narrative, but it did presage a fall from prominence: “Exposition and argument were left to us, not narration and description, which were ceded to creative writing” (Bishop, 2003, p. 265). It’s possible to conjecture, in fact, that associations with current-traditionalism as modern composition’s “convenient whipping boy” have contributed to narrative’s marginalization since

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James Berlin (1982) claims that current-traditionalism still dominates the field; Sharon Crowley (1998) notes that process models, contrary to popular belief, absorbed rather than replaced current-traditionalism’s emphasis on formalism. See also Lauer, 2003.
(Connors, 1997, p. 5). Or, as we shall see, it may have more to do with the indelible label of ‘personal.’

2.2 Expressivism and Personal Narrative

With narration no longer a cornerstone of composition pedagogy, narrative soon became primarily associated with expressivist pedagogies of the 1960s and 1970s. The rise of expressive writing in composition is somewhat related to the fall of the modes of discourse; as teachers and scholars became more focused on rhetoric, they explored a wide range of text types and purposes. Primary among these was expressive discourse, defined by James Kinneavey (1971) as “the kind of discourse which focuses on the encoder,” with attendant emphasis on emotion, individuality, and selfhood: “Without a doubt, the concern common to all of the groups [historically] interested in expression was the reassertion of the importance of the individual, of subjectivity, of personal value in an academic, cultural, and social environment which tended to ignore the personal and subjective” (p. 398, 396). The heyday of expressivism coincided with the 1974 CCCC resolution in support of “Students’ Rights to Their Own Language” and a dedication to validating students’ subjective knowledge that persists to this day. Heavily influenced by civil rights movements, expressive approaches complemented critical theories’ emphasis on the ability of personal narratives to empower marginalized voices and integrate their knowledge into dominant discourse. In this spirit, scholar-teachers like Ken Macrorie (1970), Peter Elbow (1973), and Donald Murray (1974) encouraged students to use personal writing as a way to examine their backgrounds and beliefs, to explore and authorize their own experiences and resulting insights. Similarly, researchers like Janet Emig (1971) and James Britton (1975) argued that expressive and poetic writing is
invaluable for young writers’ intellectual development and engagement in writing courses. A casualty of this emphasis was a rhetorical perspective; students were told to write about, to, and for themselves, not for an external audience they sought to engage in dialogue.

For this and other reasons, a significant backlash against expressivism occurred during the 1980s. By reductively yoking expressivism to a subjectivist worldview, James Berlin (1984, 1987, 1988) positioned its work as a romantic interlude en route to composition’s more sophisticated adoption of social-constructivist epistemologies. Despite objections that expressive approaches can be comfortably situated within social construction (Fishman, 1992; Gradin, 1995; Adler-Kassner, 1998; Paley, 2001; Jones, 2002), Berlin’s neat categorization has remained influential, leaving expressivism with negative connotations of a touchy-feely lack of intellectual rigor.9 Perhaps an even more significant blow to the status of narrative in composition pedagogy came as a result of the much-publicized debates between Elbow and David Bartholomae in 1989 and 1991, which revolved around the question: What should students be writing in college composition courses? Bartholomae (1995) argued that teachers must prepare their students for the rigors of academic discourse and thereby hone their consciousness of the ways that power operates in different discourses. Elbow’s (1995) retort was that academic writing, as a goal, leads students towards stilted mimicry of conventions they don’t understand and, more importantly, that don’t offer them the tools to engage

9 Judith Harris (2001) offers evidence of this lasting impression in a proposal to redesign George Washington University’s rhetoric and composition program. In this document expressivism is positioned as an outdated and uncritical teaching philosophy that uses primarily personal narrative exercises in “self-exploration” in the service of developing “authentic voice”; expressivism is therefore deemed antithetical to “thinking about audience and/or rhetorical situation” (p.177).
productively in their real lives and contexts. Both Elbow and Bartholomae argued from a position of advocacy for students; their disagreement arose over how best to prepare students to become lifelong writers, thinkers, and effective participants in diverse discourses. This question remains unresolved, of course, but continues to prompt valuable dialogue (Mlynarczyk, 2006; Schwartz, 2007). Far less productive is the dichotomy these debates set up between academic and personal writing (cf. Schroeder, Fox, & Bizzell, 2002; Spigelman, 2001, 2004). Within this persistent either/or dynamic, narrative has fallen firmly on the side of the personal. Indeed, the adjectives of ‘personal’ and ‘expressive’ have been applied so consistently to narrative in composition studies that they disguise the connections to autobiographical rhetoric in academic, professional, or public arenas. Before moving on, it’s worth clarifying that when I use the term expressivist to describe personal narratives or particular pedagogical priorities in this project, I do so not to participate in this denigration but rather to refer to self-oriented and socioculturally situated practice. My emphasis on rhetorical uses of narrative does not deny the value of expressivist approaches; it reflects a wish to expand and enhance that value.

2.3 Identity Politics and the Personal Narrative

Despite critiques levied against expressivism and personal writing, composition teachers have continued to employ narrative to promote a number of pedagogical aims revolving around authorizing students’ voices, validating alternative modes of communication, and negotiating difference. These goals were paramount in the 1990s as feminism, critical theory, and cultural studies permeated the discipline. The resulting attention to identity politics within and beyond the classroom perpetuated expressivism’s
valorization of personal writing, albeit with a more critical bent. The scholarship surrounding narrative in composition studies sought, as Wendy Hesford (1990) explained, “to legitimate and validate the personal experiences and voices of women and minorities by introducing their life-stories into the curriculum” and encouraging students to explore their own lives in dialogue (p. 20). Scholars advocated having students read noncanonical autobiographical texts, arguing for the utility of such testimonials for expanding students’ awareness of and engagement with marginalized, oppressed voices (Hesford, 1990; Carey-Webb, 1991; Donovan & Walsh, 1991; Kraemer, 1992).\(^{10}\) Narrative reading assignments offered teachers “the powerful opportunity for legitimizing other ways and forms of knowing” that, like students’ own, had been excluded from conventional discourses (Sirc, 1994, p. 75). And yet many of these treatments reified that gap between personal and public discourses by downplaying the rhetorical construction and circulation of narrative self-representations.

Likewise, scholars maintained the value of having students compose their own stories as a path to self-knowledge and critical consciousness (e.g., Dickerson, 1991; Brodkey, 1994; Mutnick, 1998). But in spite of the respect accorded to narrative ways of knowing and communicating, such assignments often remained divorced from rhetorical questions of purpose and audience. For the most part, this has meant encouraging students to situate their subjective experiences within their broader sociocultural contexts, with the goal of fostering critical consciousness of the ways that situated perspectives influence how humans make and share meanings. In this way, identity politics-influenced approaches to narrative retained many of the features of expressivism: students write

\(^{10}\) Donovan & Walsh (1991) discuss the value of having students compose biographies of others, engaging the issues of representation that feature prominently in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.
from their own experience and primarily for their own edification. Although pedagogical scholarship during this time suggests connections to public rhetoric, these often remain implicit or even contradictory (cf. Hesford, 1999). For example, Mary Jane Dickerson (1991) highlights “the element of performance [that] pervades texts as writers voice themselves into being by speaking and behaving from varied perspectives.” That “element of performance,” however, is praised primarily for its effects on the self as audience; Dickerson emphasizes “self-education” and the “potential for self-knowledge” when students “listen to themselves” (n.p.). This self-authorization can contribute to a sense of rhetorical agency, but few discussions pursue that thread toward audience-oriented narrative rhetoric. In the spirit of consciousness- and confidence-raising, teachers often recommend having students share their stories within the class community (Donovan & Walsh, 1991; Brodkey, 1994; Goldschmidt, 1994; Scott, 1997). This power that comes from writing one’s own stories, and listening thoughtfully to others’, is a persistent claim among treatments of narrative.

I do not wish to dismiss such a claim nor the contributions of these kinds of critical approaches to personal narrative. But there is a danger in “the uncritical celebration of personal narrative in recent years” (Brandt et al., 2001, p. 42). All of this attention to the positive potential of narrative has tended to overshadow its problematic counterpoint: Narrative is neither inherently counterhegemonic nor exclusively employed for the forces of equality and justice (Rowland, 1987; Hesford, 1999). The neglect of narrative’s rhetorical uses therefore has two related consequence: First, students are not being equipped to critically analyze the ubiquitous, often insidious influence of personal narratives in public discourses; and second, students therefore do not view their own
narratives as a basis for public engagement or persuasion. The result, as students confirmed in their responses to the courses documented here, is that the admirable goals of identity-based narrative assignments are undermined. As bell hooks reminds us, “It is possible to name one’s personal experience without committing oneself to transforming or changing that experience” (1994, p. 108). It is also, conversely, not possible to transform one’s experience, or one’s world, without committing to dialogic communication. If autobiographical narrative is to be used to encourage public or sociocultural transformation, as critical pedagogies suggest, it must be treated as a rhetorical force to be reckoned with.

2.4 Scholarly Storytelling

For the sake of this study, I have elected to focus on explicitly pedagogical treatments of narrative, but it is important to note composition studies’ attention to narrative in/as scholarship. Narrative inquiry has a long tradition in literacy research, borrowing from related discussions in anthropology and sociology to understand narrative as both an object and form of research. The importance of ethnographic methodologies, in particular, has demanded a healthy attention to the ethical issues that arise when scholars tell others’ stories (Newkirk, 1992; Bishop, 1992; Kirsch & Mortensen, 1996). Likewise, as narrative has been embraced as an outlet for marginalized discourses, scholars increasingly incorporate the personal in their academic writing as a rhetorical strategy or political statement (Rose, 1989; Villanueva, 1993; Brodkey, 1997; Powell, 1999). I do not mean to diminish the value this work by excluding it; rather, it is far too rich and diverse to cover responsibly in passing. A comprehensive overview of narrative in composition scholarship is outside the scope of this study, and so I remain
focused on pedagogical applications. There are overlaps, as in Linda Brodkey’s (1994) “Writing on the Bias,” Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater and Bonnie Stone Sunstein’s (1997) FieldWorking: Reading and Writing Research, and the collections Narration as Knowledge: Tales of the Teaching Life (Trimmer, 1997) and The Personal Narrative: Writing Ourselves as Teachers and Scholars (Guerin, 1999).\footnote{In FieldWorking, a textbook on incorporating ethnographic research into composition pedagogy, Chiseri-Strater and Sunstein (1997) devote 10 pages in the final chapter to rhetorical considerations. The example highlights strategies of using subheadings, incorporating voices of the informers, and including background research. These are certainly valuable pointers for any researcher, but they barely scratch the surface of the rhetorical resources available to, or created by, student storytellers.} But on the whole, it has been perhaps too easy to distinguish between attention to scholars’ and students’ uses of narrative or, more broadly, ‘the personal.’ For example, in their 2001 symposium on “The Politics of the Personal: Storying Our lives Against the Grain,” eight eminent scholars in the field of composition studies discuss the challenges and conflicts that attend incorporating (or not) their personal lives in their work; there is no mention of pedagogy or even students (Brandt, Cushman, Gere, Herrington, Miller, Villanueva, Lu, & Kirsch, 2001). In their scholarship compositionists pay careful attention to the rhetorical stakes of narratives, whether revisionist histories, self-representations, or research reports. That the pedagogical handling of narrative does not seem to match up with scholarship on the subject is troubling, especially in a discipline that prides itself on drawing connections between theory and practice. Composition studies demonstrates a critical engagement with narrative in research and scholarship. The next move must be to offer our students the same insights and resources to help them navigate the uses of narrative in academic and public discourses.
2.5 The Current Scene: Personal Narrative and Pedagogy

Recent work in composition pedagogy reflects the layered history outlined above by attending to the personal and political stakes of students’ autobiographical inquiry and respecting narrative ways of knowing. Scholars like Jane Hindman (2001) and Candace Spigelman (2004) have argued persuasively against the polarization of personal and academic writing by encouraging students to use their experience as a way to develop rhetorical ethos. This construction of authorial agency is a common theme among scholars who promote narrative writing, however else they may differ. Because narrative writing can also offer students an alternative to dominant discourses, it remains central to examinations of identity politics, with particular attention in recent years to issues of class (Robillard, 2003; Harris, 2004; Alexander, 2005; LeCourt, 2006; Swiencicki, 2006). Psychology-influenced approaches continue to highlight the cognitive and emotional benefits of narrative explorations (Berman, 2001; Harris, 2001; Cook-Sather, 2003; Weiser, Horak, & Monroe, 2007). Within multimodal composing, narrative seems to be handled in much the same way: composing autobiographically (often referred to as digital storytelling, which I address in Chapter 3) offers students new insights into self-construction and reflection (Jackson, 2002; Borton, 2005; Hull & Katz, 2006). Based on assumptions about students’ comfort with and competence in telling their own stories, personal narratives are therefore often utilized in basic and first-year writing as

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12 Resisting this conflation of narrative and therapy, M. Elizabeth Weiser, Joseph J. Horak, and Debra Monroe (2007) enlist cognitive psychology to argue in favor of teaching personal narratives with particular emphasis on ambiguity and dialogism; unlike narratives, they suggest, “[d]ialogic narratives… may lead students in a writing classroom toward the exact kinds of cognitive and ethical skills necessary for modern social interaction” (p. 276). Their approach is in line with critical pedagogies’ goal of fostering critical consciousness and empathy, but the emphasis on cognitive development, emotional trauma, and identity overshadows rhetorical considerations.
introductory, low stakes exercises that build confidence and community (Corkery, 2005; Mlynarczyk, 2006; Kill, 2006).\(^{13}\)

As valuable as these diverse approaches have proven to be, they tend to reinforce the idea that narrative writing is primarily about and for the self; the personal may be political, but it also seems to be relegated to private, not public, spheres. The combined effect is, as Thomas Newkirk (1997) points out, “a strange schizophrenia about narrative writing in English departments” (p. 20): Personal narratives are complex negotiations of identity and selfhood, but they are low-stakes assignments. Personal narratives offer an alternative style of argument and evidence, but they are oriented toward the self. Personal narratives can contribute to social change, but they are private. It’s telling that few of these historical treatments of narrative in composition studies draw upon narratology or narrative theory. Composition relies heavily on social psychology and anthropology but not on literary studies. There are disciplinary reasons for such a preference: in its drive to become a scholarly field in its own right, composition has often turned toward social scientific research methods for credibility. Simultaneously, it has struggled to stake its place within literature-dominated English studies. As a result, I suspect, composition has become less likely to turn to literary criticism—no matter how relevant its analytic tools—than to work from other disciplines. The effect of this terministic screen on our treatment of narrative is significant: composition has been focusing on psychological issues at the expense of textual analysis, thereby neglecting available resources of narrative rhetoric. In the next section, I outline a pedagogical project that works to

\(^{13}\) In a fascinating trend, autobiographical narratives seem to be emerging as central to community literacy projects—that is, outside of the conventional composition class (Park, 2004; Higgins & Brush, 2006; Mutnick, 2007). Such work suggests a recognition of the rhetorical power of personal narratives in public discourse and points to the value of pedagogical projects like this one.
combine the strengths of this history with the critical tools offered by rhetorical theories of narrative. Such a revision promises to enhance students’ learning and to attend to the rhetorical lessons offered by the process and products of narrative design.

4. The Project: Revising Narrative in Composition

Given the increasing emphasis on narrative throughout language, literacy, and new media studies, and in interdisciplinary and public spheres, composition studies has a responsibility and an opportunity to transform its treatment of narrative. This project attempts to contribute to that redesign process by shifting emphasis from the personal to the rhetorical nature of narrative. I hasten to clarify that such a move is not predicated upon an opposition, but rather a continuum, between personal and rhetorical narratives. As defined by John Lewis Lucaites and Celeste Michelle Condit (1985), a rhetorical narrative is one that “exists for a purpose beyond its own textuality... Both content and form of the rhetorical narrative are thus subservient to the demands of the relationship between the specific audience to which it is addressed, the specific context in which it appears, and the specific gain toward which it strives” (p. 94). Rhetorical narrative may be a redundant expression, but it is also a useful reminder that the strategies of narrative communication demand a critical lens and vocabulary. If we consider a standard definition of narrative—“somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose that something has happened” (Phelan, 2005, p. 323)—then composition studies has focused primarily on that first “somebody” (the student writer) and the “something” (their experiences) that happens, at the expense of an equal attention to the context, audience, and purpose of these narratives, as well as the resulting how of the telling.
My primary goal in this project was to forefront these rhetorical considerations, to encourage students to position their own stories as acts of communication as well as self-reflection; a secondary objective was to recruit students as active researchers into the resources of multimodal narrative. To these ends, I drew upon narrative theories to construct a rhetorical approach to autobiographical composing, designed a series of composition courses in which students employed this lens, and here report the results of these collaborative experiments. Although necessarily limited in scope, evidence suggests that, in addition to its well-documented strengths in fostering self-reflection and identity exploration, narrative may provide a vehicle for achieving some of the core objectives of contemporary composition pedagogy: fostering students’ functional, rhetorical, and critical multiliteracies. More than an expressive or empowering exercise, these case studies suggest, multimodal narrative design offers students an opportunity to hone their abilities to analyze, evaluate, and contribute to the array of messages and media that influence their lives every day. Meanwhile, the process and product of students’ designs provide an opportunity to examine narrative rhetoric, a phrase I use to refer to the theoretical framework upon which rhetorical praxis might be built; I return to this possibility in the conclusion to this volume. This dual (if not equal) emphasis on narrative in pedagogy and public discourse works to strengthen connections between classroom-based literacy research and rhetoric and thereby contribute to the ongoing revisions of composition studies within and outside of institutional education. Before elaborating upon these evolving goals and methods, I offer in the next section a summary of the pedagogical priorities that determined certain emphases of this project. After establishing these premises, I describe the methodological choices that have shaped the research
process and resultant claims. That section on method is followed by an extensive explanation of the narrative communication model, developed from informing theories, that became the cornerstone of the classroom case studies. Finally, I provide an organizational scheme that will assist the audience in reading and connecting the chapters ahead before moving on to offer an abstract of major findings.

3.1 The Premises

At this point in history, composition studies revolves around two areas of emphasis: literacy and rhetoric. As a discipline, composition is concerned with how people read and write the world, how they construct texts, relationships, knowledge, and meaning. The vast scope of this undertaking can be explained by the network of influences that permeate the contemporary field, and it explains the increasing diversification and decentralization of that field. Nevertheless, our rhetorical roots ground most conversations, as do concerns with students’ and communities’ literacy learning. These connections have been (re)established in recent years as we all try to determine how to adapt to the changing face of communication. College composition’s particular challenges involve balancing institutional demands for academic writing, disciplinary commitments to ethical communication, and students’ very real need for multiliteracy development. I elaborate briefly on these three overlapping concerns before pointing to narrative’s potential to satisfy them.

3.1.1 Academic Discourses and Beyond

From its inception(s), composition studies has been service-oriented: serving both students and the university by preparing students for other (college) writing. As demonstrated in the Elbow-Bartholomae conversation referenced above, the question of
academic discourse has been central to disciplinary identity. However, compositionists may debate the merits of emphasizing academic discourse, it remains at the core of institutional expectations, especially but not only in first-year writing. Composition holds a great deal of responsibility for training students in critical reading, research, argumentation, organization, and delivery—skills students need not only within academic settings but also in professional and civic spheres. Rhetorical approaches to academic discourse situate it as one (or several) among many discursive spheres, each with its own genres and conventions that shape and are shaped by writers (Miller, 1984; Bazerman, 1997; Bawarshi, 2003; Kill, 2006). Attention to discourse and genre has therefore moved beyond academic arenas to engage the other spaces in which students need to communicate effectively—their home communities, workplaces, and civic spaces.

As composition embarks on its public turn, an attention to genre and discourse includes challenging students to engage actively in their surrounding discourses (Weisser, 2002; Mathieu, 2005; Mutnich, 2007; Long, 2008). The call to go public, based on a belief that composition students and scholars have something to offer public discourses, is a popular one in contemporary composition studies. As Gary Olson notes, “Public writing is clearly emerging as a powerful expression of some of the field’s most cherished values” (2002, p.ix)—in particular, active and responsible participation in the world around us. By attending to the diversity of discourses in which students

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14 This public turn is closely connected to evolving approaches to service learning and outreach (Herzberg, 1994; Deans, 2000; Cushman, 2002; Flower, 2002).

15 One challenge of a public-oriented pedagogy is that very unwieldy notion of ‘public’ in which we want students to participate. But publics, as theorists like Nancy Fraser (1997, 2009), Gerald Hauser (1999), and Michael Warner (2002) have taught us, are always multiple and shifting. In this project, I use public spheres and discourses to refer to these heterogeneous, overlapping conversations rather than imagining an entirety.
participate, composition situates the task of teaching students how to write for college as part of a much broader education in transferable rhetorical consciousness.

3.1.2 Ethical Implications of Rhetoric

This emphasis on students’ consciousness, not just their compositions, is another hallmark of the contemporary field. Whether one espouses the goals and tools of liberatory pedagogy as outlined by Paolo Freire (1970, 1974) and Ira Shor (1992, 1993, 1996), the practical progressivism of John Dewey (1916, 1938), the ideological agendas of feminist and critical theories, or the conservatism of a Great Books curriculum, one acknowledges the influence of educational programs on individuals and their communities. The ethical obligations that underlie all pedagogical relationships are especially prominent in composition, with its potential to influence how students think as well as how they write. Because it reaches almost the entire student body in at least one course, composition has the opportunity to shape how students approach communication and can therefore encourage an ethical orientation to rhetoric (Clark, 1990; Ratcliffe, 2005; Wysocki, 2007; Bizzell, 2009). Indeed, we can’t teach rhetoric without, to some degree, dealing with ethics. As even the brief history above indicates, composition studies is steeped in multiculturalism and implicated in social justice:

Bringing ethics into rhetoric is not a matter of collapsing spectacular diversity into universal truth. Neither is ethics only a matter of a radical questioning of what aspires to be regarded as truth. Lyotard insists that ethics is also the obligation of rhetoric. It is accepting the responsibility for judgment. It is a pausing to reflect on

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16 When I use the word ethics throughout, I refer to guidelines for acceptable behavior within certain contexts. This does not mean a reliance on moral principles, but rather an ongoing negotiation of relationships among authors and audiences. With students, I define ethics simply, as codes of civil behavior in a particular communities or discursive sphere. This definition helps negotiate the relationship between moral beliefs and ethical principles.
the limits of understanding. It is respect for diversity and unassimilated otherness. It is finding the spaces to listen. (Faigley, 1992, p. 239)

Encouraging that act of listening has become a common goal. Composition has long been recognized as including reading, which means more than functional skill; it means an active process of negotiation. Recent emphasis on audience responsibility demands a conscientious, generous disposition to texts and their authors—what Wayne Booth (2004) called “listening-rhetoric” and Krista Ratcliffe (2005) terms “rhetorical listening.” The unifying thread seems to be that as long as composition studies is responsible for students’ rhetorical education, we can teach them an ethical orientation to rhetoric, one that promotes productive dialogue across difference.

3.1.3 Multiliteracy Education

These ethical considerations, like the move beyond academic discourse, can be related to the rise of multimodality in composition studies. As Diana George (2002), Mary Hocks (2003), and Cynthia Selfe (2004, 2009), among many others, argue, if composition is to prepare students to engage effectively in the discourses that shape their lives and communities, we must take a more expansive view of literacy. In this digital age, where students read and compose in new ways every day, the rhetoric we teach should not be limited to traditional literacies in reading and writing or even speaking and listening. At the same time, “verbal literacy is not replaced or buried so much as layered into a more diverse amalgamation of literacies” (Stroupe, 2000, p. 608). Although multimodality is certainly not new—even a conventional essay communicates via

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17 I don’t mean to imply that all compositionists have embraced multimodality in the classroom; for many, the field is defined by writing rather than literacy. See Hesse (2010) and Selfe (2010) for a recent example of these debates.
multiple semiotic modes—the rise of digital media composition has brought other literacies into the spotlight. As a result, composition has begun to rely upon a cross-disciplinary vocabulary that connects rhetoric and literacy. Shirley Brice Heath and Brian Street (2008), forerunners of the new literacy studies, define multimodal literacies as “systems of representation that include written forms that are combined with oral, visual, and gestural modes,” and that carry ideological baggage (p. 4). The influential concept of multiliteracies offered by the New London Group (1996) likewise emphasizes the multimodal nature of meaning-making and the implications for education and social responsibility in light of the cultural and linguistic diversity that marks contemporary global dynamics (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). Multiliteracies are therefore the complex network of functional, rhetorical, and critical abilities that enable effective communication in everyday modern life (Selber, 2004). In Kathleen Blake Yancey’s terms, “Composition is not writing anymore; it’s composition” (Taylor & Harbitter, 2006). Or it’s design, a term that refers to the use of semiotic resources, whether by audience or author, and that implies the dialogic nature of communication. These concepts, as my use of them will hopefully demonstrate, have become central to an expansive composition pedagogy.

3.1.4 Narrative’s Potential

Though many compositionists agree with these broad understandings of rhetoric, ethics, and literacies, the fact remains that we each have our own theoretical and practical emphases. In the year of teaching documented in this project, my own priorities revolved around fostering a conversational, collaborative approach to communication, one that highlights the mutual responsibilities of authors and audiences to achieve productive
dialogue. I suspected that a theoretical, rhetorical approach to autobiographical narrative might be a way to achieve some of these goals while also fulfilling conventional expectations of composition courses. What I discovered is that narrative is, in fact, remarkably adaptable, easily accommodating connections among academic and public discourses, genre and convention, rhetoric and ethics, traditional grammar and multimedia innovation. This dissertation can only offer a glimpse of that potential, but it points toward areas for further inquiry. Next, I turn to the research design that yielded this limited but compelling evidence of narrative’s pedagogical power.

3.2 Project Design

The purpose of this research project is to: 1) investigate students’ experiences with and attitudes towards autobiographical narrative; 2) observe students’ experiences with and reflections on the process of designing multimodal autobiographical compositions in the classroom environment, and 3) explore, based on these findings, the affordances and constraints of narrative rhetoric in composition studies and beyond. To these ends, I constructed a user-friendly narrative communication model and developed three case studies of three different courses in which students designed different types of multimodal autobiographical narrative—the memoir, the documentary, and the literacy narrative—and analyzed the results. In this section, I offer a brief overview of the method, informants, data sources, and analytical approaches that shape this project.

3.2.1 Methodological Influences

This research draws upon complementary strands in teacher research, qualitative inquiry, and rhetorical criticism—phrases laden with disciplinary baggage. By conducting research in my own classroom, I position myself as what Ruth Ray (1993)
terms a “theorist-practitioner,” concerned with both the practical workings of the classroom and the critical contributions of practitioner inquiry (Rankin, 1990; Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990, 1999). My dual role of participant and researcher aligns this project with qualitative methodologies, particularly those informed by ethnography (Bishop, 1992; Moss, 1992; Brown & Dobrin, 2004). Although classrooms have become a major site of ethnographic research, teacher-research is not quite ethnography; teachers can neither observe silently nor participate fully in the culture of subjects beyond the limited space and time in the classroom. These methods raise similar questions about reliability, representation, and what constitutes knowledge. Despite my hesitance to apply the label of ethnography, I have found reassurance in Heath and Street’s (2008) juggling metaphor as I’ve handled the dynamic data emerging from this research:

Both call for practice, close observation, and the challenge of having to manage more and more balls in the air… Both are about constant learning. Both depend on observing, comparing, reflecting, assessing, and coming to “feel” certain stages of achievement in knowledge and skill that do not easily translate into words… Finally, both engage learners in figuring out many multiples that go beyond any single moment of insight, step toward expertise, or sense of disappointment. (p. 3)

As I juggled my research questions and rhetorical agenda with students’ priorities and institutional pressures, reflexive self-criticism became a priority, as did the “decision rules” that guide areas of focus and selection of relevant data (Heath & Street, 2008, p. 45). My initial research questions demonstrate the decision rules that shape this project: How have students been taught to read and write autobiographical narratives? How can rhetorical theories of narrative contribute to analysis and production of multimodal texts?
How might such a pedagogical approach influence students’ rhetorical and critical multiliteracies? And what are the implications for composition studies? The method I developed to answer these questions was a hybrid, intuitive one—a fluidity that has alarmed me at times over the course of the project, not least of all when describing it to other scholars.

This flexibility, however, proved an asset as my research questions evolved throughout the course of the project. I realized pretty quickly that the answers to those initial questions would not be the most interesting findings to emerge from this project. Most student responses confirmed my hunches about their previous experiences with personal narrative writing in academic settings. Likewise, they tended to respond positively to taking a more critical approach to autobiographical texts, particularly multimodal varieties. And, yes, it turns out teaching rhetoric via narrative can be effective at accomplishing many of the conventional expectations of composition pedagogy. To build a pedagogical argument around such positive results would be to reinforce negative perceptions of teacher-research as mere “lore,” uncritical anecdotes aimed at replicating particular results (North, 1987). Instead, the research narrative that emerged from these experiences is an account of students’ rhetorical design of multimodal narratives. Scaffolded by narrative theories, students participated in the New London Group’s (1996) notion of design, acting as “both inheritors of patterns and conventions of meaning and at the same time active designers of meaning” (p. 64). Their compositions therefore reflect individual and collective assessment of available designs in order to achieve a redesigned approach to autobiographical narratives and, ultimately, communication more broadly. In tracing these processes, this research narrative has been redesigned from an account of
teaching methods to one of student invention. Their contributions to my understanding of narrative rhetoric have resulted in this subtextual argument about method: As composition studies works to negotiate new challenges—multiliteracies, digital spaces, shifting public discourses—we should enlist our students as collaborative research partners.

3.2.2 Data Sources

I began this project with some big questions—*How does narrative rhetoric work?* and *What are the implications for composition studies?*—as well as the more focused, practical queries list above. In order to assess the rhetorical and pedagogical resources of narrative, I designed three courses in which I asked students to engage in theoretically informed studies of narrative rhetoric. While teaching these courses, I collected data from these primary sources:

1. **Surveys**: Preliminary and concluding online surveys designed to gauge students’ experiences with and knowledge of the genre(s) of autobiographical narrative. (See Appendix B.)

2. **Responses**: Students’ responses to course readings, assignments, and exercises as evident in informal and formal writing and class discussions (live and online).

3. **Designs**: Students’ analyses of others’ autobiographical compositions and rhetorical choices in composing their own.\(^{18}\)

The value of these multiple sources has become apparent as the project moved from collection to analysis and then to interpretation. Students provided a wealth of theoretical

\(^{18}\) Specifically, data was gathered from students’ initial responses to an online survey about their experiences with and understanding of autobiographical narrative texts; their early experiments in analyzing and composing various kinds of these narratives; their ongoing negotiation of course themes and readings as reflected in written and oral conversations; their multimodal compositions of rhetorical narratives; their final thoughts on the course and its products; and my teacher’s journal/field notes.
insights, rhetorical strategies, and difficult questions that shaped the development of our courses and this research narrative.

3.2.3 Research Setting & Demographics

I conducted this research during the academic year 2009-2010 at The Ohio State University in standard composition and digital media offerings of the Department of English. The classes documented in Chapters 2 and 3 were classified as required second-year writing courses, whereas Chapter 4 comes from an elective introduction to digital media course. In all cases, therefore, the class was made up of a broad sample of students from different majors and areas of expertise. Despite this range, however, it’s important to note the relative lack of racial and ethnic diversity among the OSU student body. As a land-grant institution, Ohio State draws extensively from local Ohio areas; as a research university, it also attracts students from further afield. The result is a predominantly white, middle-class, traditional-aged, midwestern student body, enriched by healthy international recruitment and ongoing diversification efforts. The courses discussed here reflect these demographics, which in turn influence my findings. As a result, my claims must be based on a limited sample, albeit one that likely reflects a significant percentage of college composition courses at similar institutions. Further investigations of narrative rhetoric in pedagogy and practice in more diverse settings would no doubt yield helpful complications of this research.

My early qualms about using students, and their autobiographical narratives, as research subjects were somewhat ameliorated by the process of obtaining their consent through IRB protocols, but even more so by the transparency this conversation established. Attending to warnings about the unbalanced relationship established when
researchers, consciously or not, “adopt a ‘need to know’ orientation, that is, to tell [subjects] a sufficient amount that they agree to enter the research and no more,” I deliberately discussed my research agenda with students, encouraging them to position themselves as fellow researchers (Gergen & Davis, 2002, p. 246). At the same time, however, I wanted to avoid the self-consciousness that might overwhelm their own priorities in the courses and so tended not to refer to my agenda or findings during class discussions unless students raised questions. In this way I sought to retain the relationship of teacher and student over researcher and subject. In the end, it turned out that this process redefined the teacher-student relationship as one of collective research, a dynamic I attribute to several causes. First, as others have shown, incorporating multimodal composition in the classroom tends to help level the playing field; students often know as much or more than teachers about digital media, and collaborative problem-solving is essential (Wysocki, Johnson-Eilola, Selfe, & Sirc, 2004). Secondly, of course, my experimental stance ensured heightened energy and responsivity to students’ contributions.

But most important, I believe, was that the types of narratives—graphic memoirs, autobiographical documentaries, and literacy narratives—students investigated in these courses are relatively new, and not just to them. Each of these genres was selected to meet multiple goals: to capitalize upon and complicate their popularity in composition studies; engage students with appealing and challenging media; and offer, through the selected primary texts (including students’ own work), examples of autobiographical narratives that work rhetorically in public discourse. Finally, though, these text types offered students an opportunity to become experts in emerging conversations about
multimodal narratives. Their compositions therefore constitute a genuine contribution to knowledge about criticism and production. As Marie-Laure Ryan argues, “the question of how the intrinsic properties of the medium shape the form of narrative and affect the narrative experience can no longer be ignored” (2004, p. 1). Scholars have only recently begun attending to narrative across media and offer no easy answers to the questions students raised. And so students’ rhetorical designs have value not just for themselves and their audiences; they offer scholarly, critical, and practical contributions to narrative theories. This research offers students’ narrative designs as rhetorical praxis.

3.2.4 Rhetorical Designs

My analysis of students’ texts, therefore, works to respect their rhetorical agency, but this focus is actually less about my ethics than their rhetoric. After the conclusion of each course, I analyzed these various data sets in order to tease out relevant themes and findings, including data that complicate and reveal the shortcomings of the pedagogical strategies employed within these courses. The process of analyzing these data was recursive and self-reflexive, entailing numerous revisions and adjustments as I allowed students’ work to dictate my interpretive approaches. It therefore combines qualitative research and rhetorical criticism into a hybrid method that reflects the pluralism of composition studies (Lauer & Asher, 1988; Kirsch, 1992; Barton, 2002). Informed by rhetorical and narrative theories, I view students’ compositions through the same narrative communication model we employed in class. My analysis throughout this research was primarily inductive: although the original research questions dictated the selection of data, my interpretation of that data proceeded from the ground up. This process was one of “immersion in the details and specifics of the data to discover
important patterns, themes, and interrelationships; [It] begins by exploring, then confirming, guided by analytical principles” (Johnson & Christensen, 2004, p. 362). Using the multimedia coding software HyperResearch, I subjected course data to repeated qualitative analysis in order to identify dominant themes and rhetorical strategies in each case study, which in turn reflect these particular students’ situated perspectives and priorities. As a result, although each case study is structured similarly, as outlined later in this chapter, the arguments within them differ significantly. By attending to these shifting contexts, I strive to balance my research agenda with demands for scholarly rigor, ethical representation, and rhetorical insights. In the conclusion to this chapter I offer further explanation of my choices in narrating the results. First, through, I turn now to the theoretical framework that served as both heuristic and heuretic for students’ and my own narrative designs.

4. Narrative Communication Model

I have argued that composition studies’ pedagogical treatment of narrative has been constrained by a terministic screen that privileges the personal and the psychological over the public and rhetorical. In this section, I outline an alternative lens, borrowing liberally from narrative theories to develop a framework for rhetorical design. Before moving on to the details of that narrative communication model, it’s worth pausing here to define key terms and explain the principles of selection that dictated the narrative communication model outlined below and employed throughout this project.

It will not have escaped attention that although this research, building upon composition’s history with personal writing, specifically engages autobiographical variants, I refer more often to narrative writ large. My reasons for this prioritization are
twofold. First, I am interested in the rhetorical workings of narrative more broadly, and so I wanted to develop a transferable theoretical lens. Secondly, I resist the impulse to turn to autobiography studies that, whether rooted in literary or psychological traditions, tend to emphasize questions of selfhood and identity construction. As indicated within the brief history above, composition studies is already well-versed in these conversations, whereas literary approaches are relatively absent. (We are far more likely to find Jerome Bruner referenced than James Phelan, for example.) I want to suggest that we shift our own and our students’ attention outward: from reflection to rhetoric, identity to identification, private to public.

To that end, I employ concepts gleaned from rhetorical theories of narrative, both the strand of literary narrative theory that, following Wayne Booth’s (1961) lead, focuses on textual negotiations among authors and audience and the strand of social scientific narrative inquiry, particularly in anthropology and psychology, that emphasizes the performative aspects of storytelling. Located primarily within literary studies, narrative theory and narratology are interpretive approaches, often held distinct from questions of practice. Many scholars hasten to point out that their work is not prescriptive, that is doesn’t offer guidance to authors, just tools for critics. My argument, though, is that narrative theory is simply that—theories about narrative that can be just as useful for invention as for interpretation, especially because narrative critics have been so helpful as to identify and explore the major resources. As Alison Case points out, this terminology not only makes it “easier to talk about particular features of texts, it makes it easier to see them” (1999, p. 7). By extension, I suggest, narrative theories make it easier for students not just to see, but also use, those strategies. My principle of selection was utility: What
theoretical concepts would translate smoothly into rhetorical practice? By turning to tools of rhetorical criticism, I aim to shift the theoretical focus of narrative pedagogies by offering students a practical analytic along with some critical distance from their personal stories. This application of narrative theory to composition practice takes heed of Wendy Bishop’s (1999, 2003) call to treat students’ work as literature and encourages them to do the same. The transferability of this rhetorical perspective can have an equalizing effect: Students used the narrative communication model to analyze primary texts, practicing with the concepts and strategies before translating their audience findings into authorial choices. This process reflected and reinforced the dialogic model of communication within which we situate narrative texts and positioned students as major players. Their uses of narrative rhetoric, in theory and practice, therefore become important sites of discovery and invention that can, in turn, contribute knowledge to scholarly and public discourses.

Finally, to reinforce this emphasis, a small but key shift is in the adjective appended to narrative, replacing *personal* with *autobiographical*. As students revealed and I will discuss further within the chapters, the language of ‘personal narrative’ tends to reinforce a not-so-subtle distinction between students’ amateur writing and the work of published professionals. The autobiographical descriptor lends weight and implies public audiences, an essential first move for revising students’ and teachers’ views of their narratives. I do not use ‘autobiography’ as the modified noun because the adjective allows greater flexibility. The simple shift from the noun to adjective form of autobiography helped tip the scales away from purely personal self-reflection toward audience-oriented self-presentation. More importantly, whereas autobiography is
associated with the conventional whole-life retrospective, an autobiographical composition is open to innovation. As findings will demonstrate, the move from autobiography to autobiographical narrative facilitated a revision of students’ attitudes toward their own stories. This required some negotiation of popular connotations of autobiography as the recounting of the entire life of a distinguished individual.

Conventional definitions of autobiography combine the Greek roots (self, life, writing) to mean writing one’s life—that is, the whole life. The Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory defines autobiography as “a comprehensive non-fictional narrative in prose in which the author renders the facts of his/her own life, usually in the first person” (Herman, Jahn, & Ryan, 2005, p. 35). Such a definition places restrictions about the scope of the story, the style of narration, and the medium of delivery, restrictions that can serve to relegate variants to a liminal position. Within composition, especially, it would seem to preclude the kinds of writing students feel qualified or interested in writing.

More productive, I think, is Jerome Bruner’s (1990) understanding: “I do not mean an autobiography in the sense of a ‘record’ (for there is no such thing). I mean, simply, an account of what one thinks one did in what settings in what ways for what felt reasons” (p. 119). The genres considered in this project, therefore, take a more liberal view of autobiography to mean, simply, writing about one’s life—or, as my students pushed it further, writing through one’s subjective view.19

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19 Like James Olney (1998), I actually prefer the term periautography: “What I like about the term ‘periautography,’ which would mean ‘writing about or around the self,’ is precisely its indefiniteness and lack of generic rigor, its comfortably loose fit and generous adaptability, and the same for ‘life writing’ (though the term in itself seems to me less attractive than ‘periautography.’)” (p. xv) —but I somehow did not think that semantic hair-splitting would make my students any more comfortable.
With these parameters in mind I developed a narrative communication model, illustrated and elaborated upon below, as the scaffolding upon which students would construct their own theoretical frames and rhetorical designs (see figure 1). Essentially a distillation and, necessarily, a simplification of rhetorical theories of narrative, this model shaped conversations about how communication works and offered a toolkit for narrative design. In this section, I delineate the primary terms and informants that contributed to my own and students’ approach to narrative rhetoric. First, I outline the big picture of communication as interactive dialogic design, within which any rhetorical narrative is situated. Next, I discuss the narrative occasion as a context-dependent set of relationships among actual and implied players. Finally, I focus in on the narrative text itself, explaining the narrative toolkit that provided a detailed set of considerations for analyzing and composing narratives. I make few claims for the exhaustiveness of this model; any quick skim of recent narrative theory would provide ample evidence that the detailed analysis of multimodal texts can yield far finer tools. In building this particular scheme, I have done little more than re-sketch, in broad strokes, well-covered territory. But the importance of critical vocabulary cannot be underestimated: “Whether users become critically aware of [rhetorical] implications and possibilities, however, depends upon the availability of a theoretical language and a critical tradition for describing these effects and a pedagogical apparatus for teaching them” (Stroupe, 2000, p. 626). This act of synthesizing narrative theories for the purposes of practice speaks to the motivation behind this project: I offer a streamlined terministic screen, suitable for practical application, that can be adapted and further developed in subsequent research.
4.1 Acts of Communication

The broad outline of communication drawn here is a simplification of social semiotics’ concept of design as a dynamic process between situated authors and audiences drawing upon rhetorical resources (Hodge & Kress, 1988; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001; Van Leeuwen, 2005). This model attempts to capture the complex material forces at play in the production, creation, distribution, and circulation of any single text or communicative act. Within the relationships among audiences, authors, and resources, the text itself becomes both less and more prominent: less because it is clearly just one element among many to be considered, and more because it is the point of contact around which communication occurs. This model emphasizes the mutual participation required for any act of communication to be completed: “Each producer of a
message relies on its recipients for it to function as intended” (Hodge & Kress, 1988, p. 4). The processes of composition/production and interpretation/reception become equally active and responsible for any text’s meanings, and so reading—of texts in any modes—becomes an act of composing, a construction of meaning from available design resources (Bakhtin, 1981; New London Group, 1996). This model for multimodal rhetoric encouraged students to move back and forth among analysis and practice, reading and writing as informed by the same set of tools and strategies.

Within the broad frame of dialogic communication, the model illustrates the narrative act as an interchange among author, text, and audience. This heightened attention to these complex relationships enables discussions of Kenneth Burke’s (1950) definition of rhetoric as identification, a more subtle kind of influence than overt argumentation. Identification, in turn, focuses discussion on textual resources for establishing connections but also for excluding others. The ethical implications of rhetoric become paramount, both the ethics of the telling and the ethics of the told (Phelan, 2010). This attention to communication as interaction also allowed an opportunity to formalize the ‘audience roles’ adopted by critical, conscientious readers. Although not pictured on this illustration, these concepts were fundamental to our conversations in each class:

- **Actual/subjective audience**: instinctive reaction to a text, based on situated perspective, beliefs, and values that shape early responses.

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20 The centrality of reading in composition studies is well established if still under discussion (Haas & Flower, 1988; Brent, 1992; Bishop, 2003; Helmers, 2003). The social semiotic concept of design described here provides an organic connection between reading and writing for students, highlighting their naturalized behaviors as authors and audience and challenging them to reconsider their roles as both.
• **Authorial/target audience**: deliberate attempt to place oneself in the position of the author’s ideal or intended audience in order to understand rhetorical choices.

• **Critical audience**: establishment of distance in order to analyze dispassionately.

This three-part process provides a model of how responsible audiences engage texts on different levels: acknowledging an immediate, subjective response; attempting to read as the authorial audience; and taking a more detached, critical distance. While validating instinctive, subjective responses to an author, text, or issue, this scheme places those responses within a broader context that allows one to understand or qualify those opinions and, more importantly, to consider them as just one component of the process of critical interpretation. Each of these perspectives can inform and enrich interpretation as long as the audience is willing to pay attention. The authorial audience concept is especially helpful in formalizing the move towards the kind of generous listening demanded for rhetorical and ethical design. “Entering the authorial audience allows us to recognize the ethical and ideological bases of the author’s invitations”—and therefore better understand and respond (or not) to that invitation (Phelan, 1996, p. 100). By defining audience behaviors as an essential component of the communicative act, I hoped to impress upon students the importance of approaching others’ autobiographical narratives from a position of respect and receptivity even as we took a critical stance. Although audience role-playing was discussed first as a conscious process, a more organic flow developed among these positions in later discussions. The early placement

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21 These concepts are certainly not original. Composition has long asked students to acknowledge and negotiate their subjective responses en route to a critical perspective (Lu in Brandt et al., 2001; Ratcliffe, 2006). I have adapted Rabinowitz’s (1977) “authorial audience” to add another layer to this schematic, a conscious pause to respect the author’s intentions—an essential move in literary analysis that can often be missed as we challenge students to become critical readers.
of these concepts provided a foundation for later, more complex discussions about the situated and subjective nature of all knowledge-making, as well as tensions between actual and implied authors and audiences, to which I turn next.

4.2 Authors and Audiences

Within this broad conception of communication as dialogic design, the narrative occasion is the rhetorical situation that provides exigency and contexts for storytelling (Bitzer, 1968; Vatz, 1973). Attention to the contexts from which narratives arise is essential to assessing “the communicative goals that have structured the specific occasion, motivating the use of certain cues in favor of others and shaping the arrangement of cues selected” (Herman, 2009, p. 38). To represent the relationship dynamics that determine and result from particular narrative occasions, I incorporated the communication model developed by narrative theorists to schematize the layered presence of author and audience within and outside of the text. Originated by Seymour Chatman (1978), current versions of the communication model take into account complementary work by Wayne Booth (1961), Peter Rabinowitz (1977), Gerald Prince (1987), and James Phelan (1996) among others, to provide a representation of the multiple relationships among texts, authors, and audiences, which usually looks something like this:

\[
\text{actual author} – \text{implied author} – \text{narrator} – \text{narratee} – \text{authorial audience} – \text{actual audience}
\]

In addition to retaining the narrator and narratee within the text, I have retained the crucial distinctions between implied and actual authors and audiences to prevent a collapse of the model into a simplistic flow of information from real author to real audience.
Because of the centrality of the debates over the implied author concept in narrative theory circles, it is worth pausing here to explain my decision to employ the term here. Wayne Booth (1961) originally introduced the concept in order to allow critics to assign intention and design choices to some authority figure outside of the text without falling victim to the New Critics’ “intentional fallacy” (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1946). The implied author is the author’s selective self-presentation available for audience interpretation; just as any individual performs various selves in the postmodern version of subjectivity, the flesh-and-blood-person who authors these various selves is—and is not—the implied author presented to the audience. The implied author can therefore serve as a trope for acknowledging the philosophical debates over identity without allowing them to disallow rhetorical interpretations of narratives. Among narrative theorists of all schools (especially those invested in the structuralist roots of narratology), this concept has been extensively debated in conversations impossible to rehearse here. Throughout these negotiations and revisions, though, the implied author construction has proven so useful that it has stuck as an essential concept to acknowledge rhetorical design—just as ordinary audiences assume that there is a controlling hand, however subtle, guiding their experience through a text. The utility of this concept in the composition classroom is significant; from a rhetorical perspective, an interpretation of any text naturally requires attention to internal as well as external ethos of the author. Although we discussed the importance of remembering the distinction between real-life authors and their public and textual counterparts, for the sake of simplicity, and to align with rhetorical approaches to authorial ethos, I retained the simplified duality of ‘actual’

22 For full coverage of these debates, see Phelan, 2005; Kindt & Muller, 2006; and Lanser, 2009.
and ‘implied’ authors. Students were asked to note the differences between an author’s internal and external ethos, between the persona indicated by the film and the public persona of the filmmaker, and to attend to which character they were responding at different points.

For balance, the model also distinguishes between actual and implied audiences, between real readers and those the text suggests. Seymour Chatman refers to the implied reader, an expression coined by Wolfgang Iser, as the “mirror image” of the implied author, highlighting its status as an abstraction based on textual evidence (1990, p. 75). (As the model clarifies, the implied audience is a construct available only through textual cues whereas the implied author points to an extratextual presence.) For rhetorical analysis, assessing the author’s target audience, as well as the character of that audience as implied by the text, becomes essential for interpretation. My distinction between implied and actual audiences builds upon the long-standing approaches to rhetorical audiences in composition studies. I see these concepts as compatible with Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford’s vocabulary of “audience addressed” and “audience invoked,” designed to highlight the “integrated, interdependent nature of reading and writing” (1996, p. 156). The added benefit of narrative theory’s terminology is the parallelism and, therefore, familiarity and memorability that it affords. The resulting attention to the relationship among sources (not just the directors but also producers and distributors) and audiences challenged students to negotiate the complexities surrounding texts. But textual analysis remains at the core of the narrative communication model. I turn next to the extensive toolkit employed by students for assessing the detailed resources of narrative composition.
4.3 The Narrative Toolkit

This discussion moves into what I refer to as the narrative toolkit at the heart of the narrative communication model. I have prioritized the concepts within rhetorical theories of narrative that seem conducive to analysis and production and that translate well across genres and media. This task was made possible by narrative theorists’ acknowledgement that narrative studies must take into account the variety of narrative communication through “articulated language, whether oral or written, pictures, still or moving, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fables, tales, short stories, epics, history, tragedy, drame [suspense drama], comedy, pantomime, painting… stained glass windows, movies, local news, conversation” (Barthes & Duisit, 1975, p. 237). The recognition of this variety has resulted in a transferable set of terms that enables wide application. For the sake of clarity, I organize these concepts according to the major distinction between story and discourse and then further according to sub-categories within each. The resulting scheme is, of course, rather more neat than any specific narrative; the adjustments required by actual texts ensure that the narrative toolkit offers a place to begin, not conclude, rhetorical design.

The primary move in this narrative communication model, as in narratology and narrative theory, is the differentiation between ‘story’ and ‘telling.’ (The technical term for telling employed by narrative theorists is ‘discourse,’ but I chose to tweak the language to avoid confusion with the other definition of discourse utilized in class discussions.) Story designates the actual sequence of events, whereas telling refers to the reconstruction of that story within the narrative text. This distinction, largely ignored in
composition studies,\(^{23}\) is crucial to teasing out the rhetorical choices that transform basic plot into compelling, persuasive narrative:

The story/discourse distinction is fundamental to narratology because it allows for (a) two distinct groupings of narrative elements with events, character, and setting (or alternative, events and existents) under story and all the devices for presenting these elements under discourse; (b) a recognition that the relations between the elements of the two groups can vary widely from narrative to narrative; and (c) the comparison of versions of a single narrative across different media (what changes primarily in a narrative’s medium to another is discourse rather than story). (Phelan, 2006b, p. 289)

Although students quickly came to recognize the overlaps between these categories (as when a character acts as narrator), they became our first point of analysis. In the sections below, I outline the major concepts and questions within each.

4.3.1 Resources of Story

Story generally refers to the content of a narrative, the “what happened” that is represented in the text and reconstructed by the reader (Herman & Vervaek, 2005). The traditional elements of story are familiar to students, so my goal here was to provide a vocabulary that clarifies the range of available options within the standard character, plot, and setting.

4.3.1.1 Character

The characters of any narrative are the players in the action, including the possibility of off-screen characters whose influences can be felt in a story even if they are not directly present. The central figure in autobiography, of course, is the dual character

\(^{23}\) Two rare exceptions can be found in Brodkey (1984) and Hesford (1990), both of whom call for increased attention to Chatman’s (1978) differentiation between story and discourse.
of the author/protagonist—the narrating-I who tells the story and the experiencing-I who lives it (Olney, 1980; Lejeune, 1989; Bruner, 1990). The question of the other characters involved in an autobiographical narrative immediately complicates assumptions about their self-centeredness. The matter of self-characterization, the traits that are emphasized in order to portray one’s personality to audiences, is central to an author/narrator’s development of ethos. Does one represent only one’s best self, polished for public consumption? Does one reveal flaws or poor choices? These decisions, at the juncture of autobiographical story and narration, forefront the construction of identity but also questions of representation of self and others. Does the author position him/herself as the hero, the victim, the fool? This self-assigned role determines the parts available to supporting characters. The language of “positioning” is valuable here (as it will be in narration): “How are the characters positioned in relation to one another within the reported events?” (Bamberg, 1987, p. 337). Answers to that question make characterization essential to both ethics and rhetoric. An author’s choices about whom to represent, and how, reveal as much about his or her (implied) character as any other elements, including the actual plot.

4.3.1.2 Plot

I define plot as the events or actions that make up a story, including significant turning points as well as the overall trajectory of that story. These concepts emphasize selection, considering not only what happened but what moments and actions matter most in communicating meaning. In “Self-making and World-Making,” which students read in each class, Jerome Bruner (2001) defines autobiographical turning points as “those episode in which, as if to underline the power of the agent’s intentional states, the
narrator attributes a crucial change or stance in the protagonist’s story to a belief, a conviction, a thought” (p. 31). As Bruner’s reference to the narrator makes clear, the task of separating story from telling can seem impossible. But the process of winnowing a story down to its essential plot and then constructing a narrative around that kernel illustrates the choices that go into the simplest relation of events. Likewise, determining the trajectory of a plot depends on the events chosen to stand in for beginning, middle, and end of the story, not just the telling. The three basic plot trajectories are stable, progressive, or regressive, depending on the author’s evaluation: the protagonist’s state remains the same, it improves, or it declines (Gergen & Gergen, 1983). These forms provide the building blocks for more complex plot structures. In each case, the trajectory has implication for the future, reinforcing Bruner’s (2001) point that autobiographies are less about the past than we might assume.

4.3.1.3 Setting(s)

This question of temporality also arises within the category of a narrative’s settings, as do physical places and sociocultural contexts. Identifying the setting for a story therefore becomes more complicated than the physical spaces within which the events unfold, although those settings remain central. The timeframe of the story—whole life or one moment—influences an audience’s dramatic engagement with the events and characters, as does its relation to the present of the narrative occasion. These shifting temporal dynamics are necessarily bound up in authorial memory, a slippery foundation. As Jens Brockmeier (2001) reminds us, “The autobiographical process does not lead to or

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24 I should confess that I did not use Mikael Bakhtin’s (1981) concept of chronotope, the space-time matrix in which narratives unfold. I was wary of more jargon, but I think therefore missed out on some productive conversations. I would, in future work, reconsider that choice.
depart from an archive of the past” but is itself an attempt to “localize ourselves, our experiences, thoughts, and feelings within a temporal horizon” (p. 122-23). Localizing one’s self-representation is therefore an impressionistic performance for the audience. The time and place and sociocultural contexts in which a narrative is set, whether overt or implicit, shape the story and the telling, just as the settings of the narrative occasion influence authors’ and audiences’ meaning-making processes. These issues of a story’s original context also overlap considerably with decisions about the author’s present-tense vantage point as indicated by the telling, to which we turn next.

4.3.2 Resources of Telling

The telling of a story, what narrative theorists have termed ‘discourse’ (Chatman, 1978), has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention. The result is a fine-grained set of terms like analepsis and autodiegetic that have served narrative critics well but would, I thought, become off-putting in practical settings. So the telling resources within this narrative communication model are less steeped in technical jargon; what it loses in accuracy, I hope, it makes up in accessibility. I break down telling into three categories: narration, cues, and construction. As with much of this model, there is overlap, but together these terms indicate a wide range of resources that determine the relationship between author and audience and therefore dominate rhetorical design.

4.3.2.1 Narration: Voices and Views

Narration refers to how a story is told, its recounting within the text. The narration therefore controls the audience’s access to the elements of story, filtering the content through the selected storytelling strategies. Following Gerard Genette’s (1988) distinction between narration and focalization, narrative theorists attend not only to who speaks but
also who sees the unfolding story. In this model, I contain both of these elements within the umbrella term *narration* as a factor of the *voices* and *views* that tell the story and thereby guide audience interpretation. This move incorporates composition studies’ extensive discussions of voice (Yancey, 1994; Elbow, 1995b; Harris, 1996)—authentic, performative, academic, oral, and so on—and updates the concept for multimodality. As Selfe (2009) notes, the common approaches to voice demonstrate “less an understanding of embodied, physical human *voice* than a persistent use of the metaphorical language that remediated voice *as a characteristic of written prose*” (2009, p. 630). Within this narrative toolkit, the concept of voice refers the narrator’s guidance in different modes, from alphabetic titles to camera angles to soundtrack. In multimodal narratives, wherein the combination of perspectives can be represented vividly, these resources of narration become not necessarily more important but more visible and audible. Certain concepts, like unreliable narration and shifting focalization, transfer well across media and illuminate the strategic details that shape a story into a rhetorical narrative.

As in discussions of characterization, the resources of narration highlight ethical issues of representation. First, the question of whose speech and perception are privileged in a narrative raises the counterpoint of the voices and views that are *not* included, with attendant signals about authors and audiences. Moreover, when other narrators are employed, as they can be in video composition, the author’s handling of these other speakers reflects on his or her own character and credibility. Likewise, an author’s positioning of his or her own voice in relation to these others is an important indicator of rhetorical style. How does the author position other informants? Does the author unfairly

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25 For helpful discussions of narration in film, see Chatman, 1990; Levinson, 1996; and Richter, 2007.
manipulate or undermine these alternative voices and views? How is the audience encouraged to respond? Although I rarely referenced the term, Bakhtin’s (1981) heterglossia became a consistent subtext in these conversations, as students examined speakers, styles, and modes within a text and the resulting dynamics of communication. Attention to narration as both voices and views highlighted the “multiplicity of social voices and wide variety of their links and interrelationships” represented within narrative, with all the power and responsibility attached (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 263). Ultimately, then, narration is a primary resource for building relationships between authors and audiences. Here, again, positioning is paramount: “How does the speaker position him- or herself to the audience?” (Bamberg, 1987, p. 337). From what vantage point is the author reviewing the story and sharing it with the audience? These details of tense, person, and perspective reflect and shape the narrative occasion, an understanding of which includes attention to authorial cues, the next category of telling resources.

4.3.2.2 Cues

Throughout the course of an act of communication, an author guides audience interpretation through the strategic placement of textual cues. The cues highlighted within the narrative toolkit here are borrowed primarily from Peter Rabinowitz’s (1987) delineation of common rules about what elements of a text are worthy of notice. Rabinowitz’s treatment of textual cues emphasizes the audience’s role in meaning-making as well as the critical value of placing oneself in the position of the authorial audience. The ability to interpret textual cues depends upon a shared understanding of attention-worthy elements; “whether a writer is twisting the rules or using them straightforwardly, he or she must work on the assumption that the reader has command
over them to begin with, and regardless of the text, the reader reading without knowledge of the rules presupposed by the author is unlikely to recover the intended meaning” (Rabinowitz, 1987, p. 58). Although authors can explicitly declare what’s important, most indications are more subtle. The narrative toolkit replicates Rabinowitz’s own list, focusing attention on privileged positions (titles, headings, epigraphs, beginnings and endings, etc.), disruptions (breaks in textual continuity and deviations from extratextual norms), repetitions, and metaphors. Alongside these elements, I include Genette’s (1987) notion of paratext, those elements attached to texts that influence audience interpretation, including prefaces, blurbs, cover art, and other secondary signals: “These provide the text with a (variable) setting and sometimes a commentary, official or not, which even the purists among readers, those least inclined to external erudition, cannot always disregard as easily as they would like and as they claim to do” (1997, p. 3). Delineating such explicit and implicit influences involves assessing the entire apparatus involved in the production and distribution of narrative texts. Such an expansive view of authorial cues moves beyond a simple division between story and telling, as does the construction of a text from all of the above-mentioned elements.

4.3.2.3 Construction

The assembly of all of these narrative elements within a text depends upon selection, order, and resulting structure. Decisions of selection—what to show (or not), how much, and how often—include Genette’s (1983) questions about the duration and frequency of particular scenes. Likewise, the order in which such selections are arranged includes attention to the temporal relationship between story and telling: Are events presented chronologically, or are there flashbacks or jumps forward that shape an
audience’s interpretive experience? What does this order reveal about the vantage point(s) of the author/narrator in relation to the story and to the telling? The resulting reconstruction of story into narrative structure may or may not reflect the trajectory of the plot as discussed above. Considerations here include possible reliance on or rejection of conventional structures like Aristotelian tragedy, the “American Dream” or Cinderella-like archetypes. Questions of selection, order, and structure also highlight the role played by narrative gaps, those openings left by authors to prompt audience involvement in resolving a text’s indeterminacies. Wolfgang Iser’s (1978, 1989) discussion of these gaps—“the switch that activates the reader into using his own ideas in order to fulfill the intention of the text”—highlights the importance of textual indeterminacy for guiding audiences’ interpretations (1989, p. 28). Whereas didactic texts tend to enforce audience passivity, modern narratives are more prone to encourage active meaning-making. In this way, the construction of a narrative determines the progression of audience response, as discussed below.

4.3.3 Progression

The culmination of resources of narration, cues, and construction described above, progression designates the developing exchange between author and audience over the course of the text, “the synthesis of the narrative’s internal logic, as it unfolds from beginning through middle to end, with the developing interests and responses of the audience to that unfolding” (Phelan, 2005, p. 19). It involves the audience’s dual responses to the story and the telling—and the judgments that result from these negotiations. Like the discussion of audience roles, progression reinforces of the importance of attending to one’s ongoing judgments of a text (and its author) en route to
a rhetorical understanding of how it’s been designed. The extensive terminology offered by Phelan (2007) includes a breakdown of beginnings (exposition, launch, initiation, entrance), middles (exposition, voyage, interaction, intermediate configuration), and endings (exposition/closure, arrival, farewell, completion) that clarifies the management of instabilities of story and tensions of telling for rhetorical effect. Progression therefore demands attention to all of the previously listed concepts: to understand a text’s progression, one must have examined the elements that comprise it. As a final consideration, the concept of progression calls for an assembly, or reassembly, of other strategic details into a narrative act of communication. Although progression is situated within the narrative toolkit in the communication model, its resulting focus on relationships, ethics, and judgments returns questions of textual design to the extratextual dynamics of narrative rhetoric. It serves a similar use, here, of moving our discussion from the detailed terminology of narrative resources back to the bigger picture of their exploration within this project.

5. Conclusion
5.1 Organization & Emphasis

The approach to communication outlined above provides a unifying core and transferable vocabulary for this project, both my research and students’ responses. The case studies that follow provide in-depth examinations of this narrative communication model in action. In each class, students moved back and forth among modes and media, between theory and practice and back again. They read about genre and media, produced written criticism of primary texts, created their own, and composed analytic reflections

For a full explanation of these concepts, please see Phelan, 2007, p. 15-21.
on the experience and results. Each chapter shares the same structure, supported by the organizational scheme of the New London Group’s (1996) multiliteracies pedagogy. Although not a linear process, this categorization of the major moves in literacy education offers a useful framework for outlining certain key considerations in each case study: students’ situated practice, the knowledge and concerns they brought with them to the class environment; my own overt instruction that provided a theoretical foundation and common vocabulary; the critical framing in which students connected these concepts to their social contexts and implications; and the resulting transformed practice of critical, creative design. This structure enables me to present necessary background while foregrounding the analytical findings of each case study.

Within each chapter, the result of my inductive analysis appear primarily in the Critical Framing and Transformed Practice sections and, to a lesser degree, in Situated Practice. To examine students’ situated perspectives on course topics, I draw from initial surveys and conversations conducted within the first week of each course. The Critical Framing section provides an analytic synthesis of students’ negotiations of the larger social stakes of our local investigations into narrative rhetoric, based on evidence gathered from class discussions, students’ contributions to course blogs, and formal assignments. The Transformed Practice section of each chapter narrows the focus from whole-class learning to offer detailed analyses of individual students’ narrative designs according to the narrative communication model and the critical framing established in each class. Although these examples cannot stand in for all students’ experiences, I have selected the primary texts based on their representation of the most prominent and, yes, promising results in each class.
A central priority, as the reader will see within the chapters, is to forefront the voices of these student informants rather than scholars. In working through this data, I have elected to focus on what students can teach us about their concerns and strategies, what they have to contribute to the conversations about them. To attempt to incorporate all of the relevant scholarship—about narrative, multimodality, genre, etc.—would be to drown out students’ input. For this reason, I have tended to relegate scholarly voices to the margins (or, rather, the footnotes) of these chapters after the requisite contextualizing literature review. I trust that the richness of students’ commentary will justify these choices. Even as I focus on students’ experience, it has been my intention, as Deborah Brandt recommends, to avoid “inviting audiences to psychologize the interviewees, to see them as characters to be analyzed and wondered at” (Brandt et al, 2001, p. 43). Because I am persuaded that composition studies has tended to overemphasize students’ identities as the crux of narrative composition, I elected to “de-psychologize” these students’ accounts in favor of analyzing their rhetorical choices and using that work to position this research as focused not on individuals but on “the public interest” (Brandt et al, 2001, p. 44). As a result, I have tried to preserve students’ privacy and resist the urge to include information not directly contained within the data. This constraint, I hope, ensures that the focus remains on students’ rhetorical designs throughout.

5.2 Chapter Overviews

Panning out from the particular narratives within each chapter, the structural design of the dissertation as a whole reveals a progression from private to public narratives, with an attendant accumulation and complication of issues. Nevertheless, I did not intend nor do I now perceive this movement as one of linear improvement. Each course depended
upon the personalities and interests of the students enrolled, and each yielded rhetorical and pedagogical insights particular to the genres and media engaged. Individually, these case studies offer thick descriptions of narrative design in action; taken together, they enable interpretive claims about the pedagogical and public potential of narrative designs in theory and practice. In the conclusion to each chapter, I have elected to focus on one of the key follow-up questions I found myself asking: What did these particular students take away from these particular courses? What can composition teachers take away from these rhetorical approaches to narrative? What can composition studies take away from students’ rhetorical narratives? Rather than try to address all of these threads in every chapter, I elected to focus on one in each chapter’s conclusion, as indicated in the descriptions below. In this way, over the course of the whole project, I engage these primary threads without repeating them in each section.

In Chapter 2: Illustrating Lives, students studied and created graphic memoirs as rhetorical texts. By considering the familiar genre of memoir through the medium of comics, students examined strategies of construction and the visual and verbal cues that encourage audience participation and influence. Their resulting critical framing emphasized issues of positioning and perspective, intention and interpretation, and rhetoric and resources. These analytic insights contributed to compositions that moved past self-exploration toward self-presentation with rhetorical acumen and a careful attention to detail. Nevertheless, students’ associations of memoir with private memories, as well as their insecurities about their visual literacies, resulted in an avoidance of sharing their compositions, even within the class community. I close Chapter 2 by discussing the results of those particular students’ learning processes with graphic
memoir, one thread of outcomes that persists in the following cases. Students’ assessments of the course highlight the value of graphic memoir for expanding their consciousness of rhetoric in unlikely places while revising their assumptions about literacy and/in required composition courses.

Chapter 3: Documenting Lives examines students’ experiences as critics and creators of autobiographical documentaries, multimedia texts that employ personal perspectives to tell stories with rhetorical agendas. This hybrid genre and students’ analyses of primary texts led to a critical framing focused around issues of genre and epistemology, rights and responsibilities, and rhetoric and identification. Autobiographical documentary effectively undercut students’ pre-existing beliefs about objectivity and subjectivity and demanded critical attention to issues of ethics and representation. Drawing upon these conversations, students composed videos devoted to rhetorical self-presentation and designed for sharing with their local communities of family and friends. The results suggest the importance of situating textual analysis within contextual frameworks and also of attending to students’ own (implied and actual) audiences and exigencies. In the conclusion, I consider the contributions of autobiographical documentary to composition pedagogy, using this case to elucidate the thread of ethical dialogue that permeates the whole project.

In a departure from the preceding courses, Chapter 4: Narrating Literacies approaches narrative composing through the common theme of literacies in the digital age. Class discussions examined narrative as a mode of communication evident in guiding metaphors, popular practices, and individual accounts of literacy before focusing on autobiographical narratives in particular. As they studied and developed digital
literacies through the lenses of their own experiences, students developed a critical framing that emphasized investment and concerns, learning and playing, and participation and persuasion. Throughout, students’ situated priorities informed their examinations of the functional, rhetorical, and critical literacies necessary to participate fully in contemporary public discourses. Their final assignment, a video literacy narrative designed for submission to the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (DALN), offered students an opportunity to do just that: translate their findings into public-oriented literacy narratives. The results demonstrate students’ negotiations of a particular rhetorical situation and their contributions to broader conversations about sites and methods of learning. The concluding discussion considers the challenging questions raised about composition studies and/in public discourse—and the role(s) of narrative rhetoric in both.

Whereas the conclusions to particular case studies highlight different take-aways (for students, for teachers, for the discipline), the final chapter returns to those original questions—*How does narrative rhetoric work?* and *What are the implications for composition studies?*—to suggest that students’ multimodal compositions might offer some valuable answers and generate new questions worth pursuing. I approach these questions in reverse order, using students’ responses to consider, first, how narrative rhetoric stands to benefit composition studies and, second, what these results indicate about the potential of narrative rhetoric to foster ethical, dialogic orientations to communication in public discourses. Raising more questions than answers, this conclusion reflects on the project as a whole in order to look ahead to future opportunities. Ultimately, I suggest, we are in the midst of a kairotic moment for both
composition and narrative studies, one that calls for critical, creative approaches to narrative design in the service of productive communication.
CHAPTER 2: Illustrating Lives: Graphic Memoir and Multimodal Composition

1.1 Introduction

In a project devoted to taking narrative rhetoric seriously, I’d like to open with a chapter about comics. I imagine the reader will be less shocked by this move than students were when they discovered that their required second-year writing course would be devoted to graphic memoir. An emergent art form that raises issues of selfhood, identity construction, and cultural influence in exciting new ways, graphic memoir seems well suited to a rhetorical take on autobiographical narrative, as well as to the common goal of fostering students’ visual literacy, “the ability to read, understand, value, and learn from visual materials… as well as the ability to create, combine, and use visual elements” in their own communicative endeavors (Selfe, 2004, p. 69). Throughout the course, students’ experiences bore out these expectations even as they complicated my own assumptions. The evidence assembled here suggests that although the process of designing graphic memoir may not directly cause students to position their autobiographical narratives as public acts, it can heighten students’ consciousness of multiliteracy learning in ways that contribute to feelings of authority and therefore, possibly, critical agency. For these reasons, this opening chapter establishes a point of departure from personal narrative as self-oriented self-reflection toward autobiographical composition as audience-aware self-presentation. It also launches my assessment of the
affordances and constraints of narrative rhetoric in the multimodal composition classroom by focusing on students’ assessment of the course’s value in their academic and extracurricular lives.

1.2 Chapter Overview

Before moving on the specifics of this case study, the Contextualization section situates it within the expanding discussions of visual literacy in composition pedagogy and the rising profile of comics within academic and public discourses. Because the medium offers material for examining dialogic communication and multimodal construction, scholars have heretofore focused on the value of asking students to read comics in English courses. My own pedagogical project extends these arguments by emphasizing the benefits of having students compose as well as decode comic texts, particularly the sophisticated form of graphic memoir. In section 3 I describe the resulting Course Design as the rhetorical situation from within which students’ work emerged. With this background in place, I move on to consider (particular aspects of) student’s Situated Practice, their pre-existing knowledge of and beliefs about comics and memoir that influenced their subsequent experiences in this class. In the following section, Overt Instruction, I outline the definitions and concepts that I offered during the early days of the course in order to provide a shared foundation upon which students constructed their narrative designs.

The Critical Framing section that follows offers a necessarily truncated analysis of the major themes that emerged during discussions (in class and online) and through students’ first two compositions. In the interests of brevity—because I imagine we all want to get to students’ graphic memoirs—I provide only a small, focused fraction of the
critical issues students raised. According to my inductive analysis of class data, I identify three dominant themes: positioning and perspective, intention and interpretation, and rhetoric and resources. These framing concerns provide a useful lens that I employ, in conjunction with the narrative communication model, to interpret students’ Transformed Practice in section 7. This discussion focuses on three students’ graphic memoirs, selected to represent the range of topics engaged, resources explored, and insights gleaned from their experiences. In the Conclusion, I step back from these specific examples in order to consider the outcomes of this course according to students’ own assessment of their experiences and accomplishments. As their comments reveal, students valued the course in large part because it broadened their perceptions of what rhetoric is, where it’s found, and how it might be productively taught. By focusing on students’ evaluations, this research narrative resists a neat moral in favor of acknowledging both affordances and constraints of graphic memoir within this project and composition studies more broadly.

2. Contextualization

2.1 Visual Literacy and Comics Composition

Historically, as Diana George (2002) points out, visuals have been employed in composition pedagogy as a way to include popular texts and appeal to students’ outside interests in order to expand their rhetorical consciousness. More recently, thanks in part to the increasing use of digital media in the classroom, these goals have been reformulated to include students’ own visual composing. Scholars like George (2002), Charles Hill (2003), and Mary Hocks (2003) have persuasively argued for increased attention to visual design in the classroom, while visually-oriented textbooks like Donald
McQuade and Christine McQuade’s (2006) *Seeing & Writing*, Wendy Hesford and Brenda Brueggemann’s (2006) *Rhetorical Visions*, and Lester Faigley, Diana George, Anna Palchik and Cynthia Selfe’s (2004) *Picturing Texts* offer students and teachers new ways to think about visual media in relation to linguistic and other semiotic modes.\(^{27}\) The popularity of visual composition can be attributed in part to the familiarity and accessibility of resources that make it a “good first step,” as Selfe (2004) suggests, for compositionists looking to expand their pedagogical repertoires (p. 68). This increased emphasis on visual literacy has coincided with the rising popularity of comics, suggesting for many teachers and researchers their synergistic potential.

As yet, most work on comics in literacy education is happening at the level of early education, where comics are often incorporated as a way to target children’s extracurricular interests.\(^ {28}\) In recent work, assumptions that comics serve only as stepping-stones to higher levels of literacy have given way to an appreciation of their ability to teach innovative ways of reading (and, to a lesser degree, writing) in different modes.\(^ {29}\) Although little has yet been published specifically on the subject of comics in composition studies, there are signs that this will soon change. Reflecting on his own experiences, Dale Jacobs (2007a, 2007b) argues for greater respect for comics as “cultural artifacts, sites of literacy, means of communication, discursive events and practices, sites of imaginative interplay, and sponsors of literacy” and suggests the value

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\(^{27}\) Such pedagogical work is bolstered by the wealth of recent rhetorical theory and criticism on visual communication. For a range of approaches, see the collections by Kostelnick & Hassett, 2003; Hill and Helmers, 2004; and Handa, 2004.

\(^{28}\) The lesson-planning tips available on ReadWriteThink.org and LearnNC.org provide just a glimpse of this work.

\(^{29}\) See, for example, Handsfield, Dean, & Cielocha, 2009; Morrison, Bryan, & Chilcoat, 2002; Crilley, 2009; and Schwartz & Rubinstein-Avila, 2006.
of reading comics within a multimodal pedagogy (2007a, p. 182). Likewise, Laura Micciche (2004) and Hillary Chute (2008) suggest that comics’ combination of verbal and visual elements can help with ongoing expansions of our own and our students’ definitions of reading. There is reason to believe that publication about comics in pedagogy simply hasn’t yet caught up with practice: any scan of online syllabi and recent conference programs reveals many composition courses and specialties that engage comics or graphic novels. The multimodality of comic texts can help bridge conventional and alternative approaches to literacy education, retaining focus on linguistic literacy while placing it in dialogue with other modes. As George (2002) points out, visual and verbal communication are too often held in opposition in composition pedagogy, rather than treated like the complementary modes we know them to be in everyday life. Comics stand to help compositionists overcome what Sean Williams (2001) calls our “verbal bias” and the limitations it imposes on our own and our students’ perspectives on language and power (p. 23). By foregrounding the integration of words and images, comics blur lines between semiotic modes, resembling the kinds of multimodal complexity students must negotiate every day in various discursive spheres. In order to take advantage of this potential, I suggest, composition studies should move beyond the current emphasis on reading comics to investigate the value of students creating their own comics, particularly the powerful graphic memoir. Such a proposal becomes less outré in light of the rising profile of comics in popular culture.

2.2 Comics Medium and Memoir Genre

Comics are having a moment. Valued until recently in the mainstream primarily as a source of material for other formats, especially film, the medium itself is
experiencing (like memoir) a significant boom in both popular publishing and academic scholarship. In the past 25 years, landmark works like Alan Moore’s *The Watchmen*, Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, and a host of literary adaptations from the Bible to *Moby Dick* have created a market for full-length comics for readers of all ages. Scholars have responded with theoretical and cultural examinations of the medium: its historical roots, major trends, formal and material permutations, and influences on diverse audiences. Among the most influential of these texts are those by practitioners, like Will Eisner’s (1983) *Comics and Sequential Art* and Scott McCloud’s (1993) *Understanding Comics*, an introduction to and in the comic form that has garnered a good deal of academic attention (e.g., Chute, 2008; Watkins, 2008; Brooks, 2009; Hanson, 2009). Scholarly journals like *Modern Fiction Studies* and *American Periodicals* have devoted special issues to exploring the medium and its emerging canon, while newer forums like *The Comics Journal* and the *GutterGeek* blog blur the lines between academic and popular discourses. The University of Florida holds a yearly Conference on Comics with an interdisciplinary emphasis, and the National Association for Comics Art Educators maintains a list of higher educational institutions offering courses and majors. This wave of attention has repositioned comics as not a juvenile or remedial medium but a sophisticated communicative form deserving further research.

Perhaps most lauded of all are long-form graphic narratives and, more specifically, graphic memoir. Thanks in large part to *Maus*, Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*, and Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, critics have begun demonstrating the power

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30 For a sample of this work, please see Witek, 1989; Inge, 1990; Sabin, 1998; Bongco, 2000; and Hatfield, 2005.
31 Chute (2008) uses the phrase “graphic narrative” to encompass both fiction and nonfiction; Whitlock (2006) has coined “autographics” to highlight graphic memoirists’ complex, shifting subject positions.
of the comics medium to represent personal experiences in ways that draw attention to the authors’ processes of self-narration and rhetorical representation of subjective realities (Micciche, 2004; Chute & DeKoven, 2006; Jacobs, 2007b; Chute, 2008). The centrality of graphic memoir in comics’ recent renaissance offers this project a productive point of connection between autobiographical genres in composition studies and the comic medium. Graphic memoir effectively emphasizes the rhetoricity of memoir: the texts are produced and published with such effort and effect that they resist being deemed a wholly self-oriented or expressivist act. Likewise, the role of the audience in decoding the verbal and visual elements and filling in the gutters highlights the dialogic nature of design. For these reasons, I suggest, graphic memoir offers composition studies a way to complicate students’ comfort with (and occasional disdain for) conventional personal writing assignments while fostering deep multiliteracies. The course documented in this chapter explored that possibility.

3. Course Design

Like the others in this research project, the course documented here approached some of the primary objectives of composition courses through rhetorical engagement with narrative. In “Illustrating Lives,” students analyzed and created graphic memoirs within the context of a second-year writing requirement. As a class, we read and discussed Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* and Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* through the lens of the narrative communication model and informed by scholarship about comics, visual composing, and narrative (McCloud, 1993; Faigley, George, Palchik, & Selfe, 2004; 32

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32 At Ohio State, this requirement is designed to develop students’ rhetorical awareness and facility with academic discourse; with these objectives in mind, instructors enjoy flexibility in selecting themes and designing assignment sequences.
Bruner, 2001; Versaci, 2007; Phelan, 2007). The assignment sequence invited students to critically examine the genre and medium and translate their growing awareness of verbal and visual resources into rhetorical practice. The first composition was a variation on *SMITH Magazine*’s popular “6-Word Memoir” series; I also asked students to create a 6-image and 66-word version of the same story. A key component of this micro-memoir assignment was the analytic reflection in which students examined their processes and results. The attention to detail prioritized by that first assignment provided a helpful foundation for the second, an academic argument based on a rhetorical analysis of a selected short autobiographical comic. Students were asked to subject their resulting essays to the same analytic lens they used for narrative, considering the conventions of academic discourse as variations on these themes. Finally, students composed short graphic memoirs of their own using the computer software ComicLife. The assignment included formal proposals and, again, analytic reflections. Over the course of the term, students’ investigations yielded conversations about self-representation, communication, and multimodal rhetoric, which I outline below in the *Critical Framing* section. This critical frame became the foundation upon which students constructed their comics, three of which I analyze in the *Transformed Practice* section. But first, below, I flashback to the beginning of the course and students’ situated perspectives on memoir and comics.

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4. Situated Practice

It is, of course, impossible in this kind of research report to capture, or even sketch, students’ situated knowledge based on their “experience[s] of meaning-making in lifeworlds, the public realm, and workplaces” (New London Group, 1996, p. 65). For my purposes here, I focus specifically on students’ pre-existing beliefs and practices regarding memoir and comics, as well as their stated objectives in the course. I offer this overview of students’ starting points in order to acknowledge the influence of their situated practice on their experiences and resulting compositions and, admittedly, to trace the progress of these perceptions. The resources students brought to this particular class varied widely; I indicate here only the basic patterns that emerged from the preliminary survey and early discussions in class and on the course blog. When students enrolled in the course, they had no way of knowing that it would focus on memoir or include digital composing; their point of entry into this class was simply a university-wide second-year writing requirement.35 As a result, the members of the class reflected a fairly wide range of majors and degrees of literacy for sophomore and junior students at OSU.

Almost all would have taken the first-year writing requirement, which emphasizes rhetorical analysis and academic inquiry. As several commented, however, they did not feel confident in these areas: “I am concerned that I don’t have or have not committed to memory proper writing skills. I still do not understand what rhetoric is” (survey). This desire for both functional and rhetorical literacies was echoed by many students in response to a survey question about the priorities a course like this one should emphasize.

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34 See Appendix B.
35 The course was one of roughly thirty classified under the general name of “The U.S Experience”; its only distinction was that it was scheduled in two different classrooms.
Answers indicated shared concerns about academic writing and grammar, particularly punctuation. Even more suggested their sense that such a class should “broaden our writing horizons” by including “a few unconventional writing/composition styles” and fostering transferable communication skills (survey). Certainly some of these responses must be attributed to the fact that by the time they completed the survey students had attended the first day of class and discovered its theme. As their later comments will reveal, however, the initial prioritization of variety and practicality contributed to students’ subsequent learning experiences. Likewise, the course trajectory was shaped by students’ previous exposure, or rather the lack thereof, to memoir and comics.

4.1 Defining Memoir

Students recognized the genre of memoir as a kind of autobiographical writing but could not define or distinguish it from other kinds of nonfiction. In part, this came down to their stated lack of exposure. In class discussion, only two indicated they had read memoirs: James Frey’s infamous *A Million Little Pieces* and one written by a great-grandfather in the military. On the survey, several more indicated they had “kind of” read a memoir, but most indicated they had little direct experience with the genre. A majority of responses used the word “story” with no reference to the act of telling other than their association with “first person” (survey). Whereas a few suggested that autobiographical accounts revolve around “significant events” in “history” or “politics”, most emphasized “personal memories” with “deeper insights” like those in a “journal”; one offered a telling string of modifiers: “emotional, internal, private, individual, exclusive, secretive”

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36 Frey’s case—especially Oprah’s wrath—provides excellent material for debate over issues of veracity and verisimilitude in terms of rhetorical effect and audience response.
(survey). At the same time, though, students agreed that autobiographical narratives can influence audiences.

Primarily, they noted, such texts offer opportunities to learn from others’ cautionary or motivational tales, especially their “mistakes”; in offering these lessons, “someone’s own personal story can have a profound effect on another’s life” (survey). A few also suggested that autobiographical narratives can offer glimpses into others’ lives and, therefore, make audiences “more accepting” or “understanding” of people whose experiences differ from their own (survey). On the whole, then, students’ initial perceptions of memoir seem to reflect conventional associations, in education and mainstream media, of memoir with reflection, moral instruction, and, to a lesser degree, connection across difference. These associations may help explain why memoir and autobiography ranked quite low in students’ estimation of the kinds of texts that shape how people think or act. Although 80% of students deemed autobiographical writing “influential” or “somewhat influential,” it ended up well below music, film, and even reality television. This ranking is particularly striking in that students overwhelmingly selected personal experiences and conversations as being the most powerful influences. According to this logic, then, one’s own narratives shape beliefs and behaviors more so than others’. As we shall see, this emphasis may help explain students’ eventual decisions about the rhetorical reach of their own memoirs: for many, the audiences most likely to be affected by their narratives were themselves.\footnote{For further discussion of the distinctions students draw between personal narrative assignments and public/published autobiography, please see the Situated Practice section of Chapter 3, which offers results from a similar but more specific survey.}
4.2 Revising Comics

Although they were certainly more familiar with the term comics than memoir, students’ initial discussions of comics revealed a similar lack of exposure. Their early definitions of the medium were the conventional ones: cartoons and “funny pages,” Calvin and Hobbes, superheroes, and, most of all, childhood. Most knew of graphic novels like The Watchmen and Sin City but only through their movie adaptations.

Students’ surprise at learning that they would be devoting a college course to studying comics was soon matched by their realization that the medium was far more diverse than they assumed. From those early conversations I gathered that although assumptions about students’ pre-existing relationships with comics might be exaggerated, their appeal was not. Usually, after I inform students that a class will involve digital media or an alternative genre, I can expect at least a handful to drop the course by the end of the week. But in this case not one withdrew, and the wait-listed students who arrived hopefully for several class sessions eventually had to give up. This enthusiasm no doubt arose as much from an expectation of easy fun (in contrast to assumptions about the writing requirement) as from any investment in the topic. But I also suspect that our first-day exercise helped: drawing from Matt Madden’s (2005) 99 Ways to Tell a Story: Exercises in Style, I asked the class to ‘read’ a series of comic variations on the same scene with different formal or generic elements: subjective perspective, monologue, horror, etc. Most students got involved in the puzzle-play and were pleased to discover that their critical vision and knowledge of conventions were stronger than they might have suspected. Nevertheless, as the term wore on and students continued to assess their visual literacies, many came to see their situated practice as limited by previous
educational emphasis on alphabetic writing to the neglect of other modes of communication.

5. Overt Instruction
5.1 Defining Memoir via Tellability

In our first few classes, I began by providing basic definitions and pointing towards major theoretical questions. Following (most) scholarly convention, I distinguished between autobiography as a whole-life-spanning narrative and memoir as a more partial, often less formal, representation of an event, relationship, or theme in a person’s life (Buss, 2002; Faigely, George, Palchik, & Selfe, 2004; Loschnigg, 2006; c.f. Smith & Watson, 2001). More specifically, I offered definitions from the Oxford English Dictionary and invited students to assess the possible variations:

- Records of events or history written from the personal knowledge or experience of the writer, or based on special sources of information,
- A person’s written account of incidents in his own life, the persons whom he has known, and the transactions or movements in which he has been concerned.

One goal of these preliminary definitions was to take some pressure off students to record their entire existence, which many claimed would not be particularly compelling at this stage in their lives. Even with the distinction between autobiography and memoir, students were often concerned about composing a narrative from their limited personal experiences, as I’ll discuss in later sections. To assuage these anxieties, I emphasized Jerome Bruner’s (2001) notion of tellability; for a story to be worth telling, it “must

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38 As any quick Internet search or library scan suggests, the distinctions between memoir and autobiography, among scholars or in popular usage, are by no means consistent. For a helpful discussion of the history of memoir in relation to autobiography, see Rak, 2004.
violate canonical expectancy, but do so in a way that is culturally comprehensible” (p. 72). This definition became clearer as the class embarked upon collective and individual analyses of primary texts. Whereas Satrapi’s and Spiegelman’s memoirs are patently significant—socially, culturally, psychologically—the short autobiographical comics and students’ micro-memoirs suggested a wider range of stories worth sharing. That is, memoirs often engage the mundane and everyday but manage to do so in a way that fulfilled the “paradox that the autobiographer be both unique and representative” (Gilmore, 2001, p. 9). Throughout our course conversations, this expansive view of memoir emphasized the dialogic relationship between personal and public, individual identity and cultural context.

5.2 Clarifying/Complicating Memoir through Comics

To provide students with a critical lens for reading graphic memoirs, I offered readings from the field of comics studies. McCloud’s (1993) definition of the medium of comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images [including words] in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” provided a useful starting point (p. 9). This explanation highlights several key points that we teased out over the course of the term: “juxtaposition” and “sequence” demonstrate the importance of arrangement and structure, the inclusion of words as “images” complicates the usual distinction between visual and linguistic modes, and the purpose of the whole is to “produce” an audience response. From McCloud (1993), students also learned the essential vocabulary of frames, gutters, bleeds, and movement in time and space as well as broader theoretical arguments about the value and potential of comic communication. In terms of autobiographical variations, Versaci (2007) offered
insights about the unique resources of self-representation afforded by the medium, highlighting comics’ compatibility with a social constructivist view of reality: “The comic book memoir reminds us at every turn that the retelling of one’s personal history is, in part, an act of invention… To read such a work is to understand at a fundamental level the ‘truth’ of a memoir is something that cannot be tied simplistically to the facts” (p. 58). In the work that followed, students negotiated the questions that result: “How can one best express the true nature of his or her self? What exactly is a ‘self’? In a memoir, what does it mean to be true?” (Versaci, 2007, p. 36). As their critical framing suggests, however, students ultimately found themselves less concerned with truth than with tellability and the resources of telling.

5.3 Narrative Communication Model

After these preliminary definitions of graphic memoir, I positioned narrative texts within a rhetorical framework in the next class period (see figure 2.1). By treating genre and medium before situating them within the narrative communication model, our discussion progressed from the particular text-type outward to consider its rhetorical nature. In this case, the ground-up approach explained rhetoric according to what students instinctively understood and McCloud’s (1993) definition of comics highlighted: that texts produce effects. The narrative communication model formalized and provided a common vocabulary for students’ examinations of this process. These concepts became a starting-point for the conversations that followed: students’ collective and individual analyses of graphic memoirs, their experiments with linguistic and visual micro-memoirs, and the resulting critical frame that shaped their own narrative designs. I turn next to that
process of critical framing, students’ transformation of this overt instruction into their own practical and theoretical knowledge.

Figure 2.1: Narrative communication model

6. Critical Framing

Scaffolded by those supplied concepts, students’ critical examinations of comics and memoir (their own and others’) prompted conversations about some serious issues in class discussions, on the blog, and in the required analytic reflections for each assignment. In this section, I offer select findings from my analysis of these data sources in order to point to the results of students’ critical framing, their consideration of narrative design “in relation to the historical, social, cultural, political, ideological, and value-centered relations of particular systems of knowledge and social practice” (New London Group, 1996, p. 86). It is not possible to cover all of students’ questions and tentative answers here, however I might wish to document their astute negotiations.
Instead, based on an inductive reading of students’ work and discussions, I have synthesized the major themes according to these categories: positioning and perspective, intention and interpretation, and rhetoric and resources. These critical issues, distilled from the range of questions raised in my own and other scholars’ overt instruction, offer a sense of these students’ priorities. Although this critical framing would arise differently among other students in different contexts, it indicates several productive themes that graphic memoir may highlight. Below, I elaborate upon each of these core concepts to reconstruct, at least in part, the theoretical and practical issues that shaped students’ learning processes before turning to consider the results evident in their own graphic memoirs.

6.1 Positioning & Perspective: Representing Identity and Memory
6.1.1 Narrating- and Experiencing-I’s: Presenting Plural Identities

As their early survey responses indicate, students tended to associate memoir with memory: stories from the past more so than telling in the present. While they examined primary texts and crafted their own micro-memoirs, this emphasis shifted toward the literal and figurative construction of those memories into memoir by the (often prominent) hand of the author. Graphic memoirs, or at least those engaged in this course, make visible the distinction between the author’s present narration and past actions. By convention, the “narrating-I” is distinguished from the “experiencing-I” by text boxes and bubbles respectively, providing audiences with a way to differentiate autobiographical selves (Lejeune, 1989). Through the visual form, autobiographers become ventriloquists of both their narrators and their previous selves, a process that layers past and present perspectives, voices, and personalities; as students noticed, authors do “a lot of work… to
differentiate between [his/]her present day self and the person that [he/]she was at the time” of the events depicted (V.A., essay). The careful reader must parse distinctions between, for example, Artie the impatient son and Art the tormented artist, both of whom appear within the text of *Maus* and neither of whom is the author who spent decades crafting that text. In fact, many students’ initial difficulties separating character from narrator from author in *Maus* became illustrative of narrative progression, as discussed below. Presenting a self to audiences involved deliberate editing, not wholesale disclosure, a realization that heightened students’ awareness of authorial construction of ethos.\(^\text{39}\)

6.1.2 Autobiographical Eyes: Illustrating Subjective Points of View

As Versaci (2007) explains, “by their very nature, comic book memoirs present the world as seen through their artists’ eyes, and those ‘visions’ become the memoirists’ powerful and evocative worldview” (p. 45). Students’ readings revealed multiple possibilities: The self and the world can be drawn like they once seemed or now appear, or with a (literal or figurative) filter/mask, or with variations according to mood. The case of *Maus*, which represents Jews as mice and Germans as cats, is an extreme case of “a constant metaphor… a second, and bolder, representation of the roles the Jewish, Nazi, and even Polish people were forced to take on during this time” (K.S., blog, 4/11). The animal conceit enabled thematic commentary, convenient characterization, and a degree of distance through “dehumanization” that enabled audiences “to read the story with a

\(^{39}\) In this light, self-representation came to be seen as “a social phenomenon with rhetorical effects and social recognition, not as a private, internal, or authentic experience” (Danielewicz, 2008, p. 422).
little more ease” (B.K., blog, 4/11). In a less overt move, Satrapi uses a spare, impressionistic style to represent a child’s take on the horrors of war and exile, designed less for realism than for the evocation of emotion and mood. As one student commented, he was initially afraid that a child’s perspective would limit the text’s ability to communicate complex adult themes, but soon realized that Satrapi used this limited view deliberately: “[T]his is done in a way that the audience still can gather all the details, so even if the child doesn’t understand something it is presented in a way that the audience goes ah-ha” (K.A., blog, 4/23). Moreover, by presenting Iranian history “through the eyes of a little girl” Satrapi appeals to adults’ desire “to relate to children because of their innocence” (I.M., blog, 4/25). Students’ investigations attuned them to the idea that psychological realities can be as important as facts, that the comics medium can illustrate tensions between subjective perception and actuality, and that perspective can be used “to manipulate the reader’s orientation… [or] to manipulate and produce various emotional states in the reader” (Eisner, 1985, p. 89). These rhetorical resources of focalization remained a central point of discussion, particularly in terms of the tension between authorial intention and audience interpretation.

6.2 Intention & Interpretation: The Dialogic Process of Self-Presentation

6.2.1 Autobiographical Rhetoric: From Self-representation to Self-presentation

Students identified multiple motivations for composing and circulating memoirs. Survey responses had emphasized self-exploration designed to construct meaning out of memories, and analyzing primary texts reinforced the idea that memoirists write, at least

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40 The 1972 comic in which Spiegelman first employed this conceit provided a useful contrast in that the original mice were far more detailed and cute, seeming to deliberately play up the resemblance to Disney characters. Students applauded Spiegelman’s stylistic revisions for their rhetorical consequences: “I found the more detailed drawings in 1972 Maus were almost distracting and drew away from the language… Spiegelman fixed [that] in the newer version” (K.A., blog, 4/9).
in part, for themselves. In some ways, this can be attributed to the therapeutic value students observed or experienced. *Maus*, many opined, helped Spiegleman come to terms with, if not resolve, personal issues: “I think that Spiegelman used Maus as his blog or diary, its a way for him to get it all out but also provides him with a written copy of the details of his families history and struggle” (V.A., blog, 4/21) For some authors, like Satrapi, the decision to compose may have reflected a desire to be heard or to bear witness: “Sometimes one has a story or thought they feel compelled to share, not for someone specific, just for the sake of letting it be known” (P.T., essay). The case of *Persepolis* also raised the potential use of “autobiographical means to other ends” (Gilmore, 2001, p. 9). Some students expected an explicit purpose: “The purpose of the memoir is to send a message to your audience” (M.S., blog, 5/24). In Satrapi’s case, as I’ll discuss below, students detected an agenda of political critique and cross-cultural education that suggested more deliberate deployments of autobiographical narrative.

6.2.1 Audience Response: Temporal Progression and Situated Reception

Turning a critical eye on comics, and particularly spending weeks reading long-form narratives, highlighted the temporal process of interpretation. The progression of students’ relationship with the character and author Art Spiegelman offered a useful case study of the construction of those tensions, the ways that the author prompts readers to judge the character, and even the narrator, at different points. Students’ reactions to Chapter 2 in Volume 2—wherein Spiegelman draws his authorial self with a mouse mask over a human face and reports his father’s death, book’s success, and resulting depression—crystallized the rhetorical effects of construction; as one student suggested,
The author is now ready to present himself in a different light. Before I think he wanted us to ignore him and his feelings and sympathize with his father. Due to the way he uses the details of him sitting at his desk with flies swarming around him and being unshaven, I think he is presenting himself to us more openly and allowing us to see his true depression from the loss of his parents. I who have hardly sympathized with Art up to this point am now ready to let him in and feel what he has gone through as the son of this difficult man, not truly knowing his mother's experiences, and not holding the connection to his parents that Richieu had. (B.C., blog, 4/9)

Others concurred, noting both Spiegelman’s deliberate choice—“This section of the book could have easily been placed at the end to wrap up the way he felt about the book, or it could have easily been put at the very beginning”—and the implications for their readings: “I think I would have looked at his character a little closer had I seen this little section first” (Y.C., blog, 4/15). The pace of our schedule helped reflect the slow reading process comics require. The initial idea that comics are faster and easier to read shifted as students realized that “in order to get the full message from the story I had to go back and slow down my reading, grasping the full image before proceeding” (K.S., blog, 5/2). These reading practices focused attention on authors’ construction choices, the strategic manipulation of shifting responses in the service of the culminating closure.

In a similar way, our slow progression through the texts allowed students time and space to track how their judgments changed from week to week as well as chapter to chapter. Whether negotiating their discomfort with Spiegelman’s treatment of his father or their defensiveness at Satrapi’s critiques of British and U.S. involvement in Iranian

41 As Micciche (2004) argues, “There is a recursive quality to reading comics—we read and re-read, absorbing new details each time and comprehending the significance of a page, for instance, only after the words and pictures in each panel have sunk in” (p. 9).
politics, students considered these responses within the specifics context of their readings as well as sociocultural dynamics. Some students noted that their tendency to “side with” Vladek or Art in certain confrontations revealed their own biases: “I guess I have a soft spot for old people” (K.A., blog, 4/9); “I feel bad for the son also, because I know that I’ve been in the situation before where I have been so pissed at someone that I say the worst possible thing to them so they can feel equally mad” (S.S., blog, 4/11). These reactions were also linked to timing. Most acknowledged that they would have responded differently to Satrapi had they not just read and preferred Maus: “[G]oing from the detailed drawings of Maus to the plainness of these drawings was kind of disappointing and not anywhere near as appealing as Maus was” (I.M., blog, 4/25). Although opinions differed on their quality, most students agreed that Persepolis was difficult to interpret “due to the fact that we are not taught much about these conflicts, whereas we learn and have read many books about the Holocaust” (R.J., blog, 5/2). As another reflected, “I am almost mad now that I have finished Persepolis that I am so uneducated about the revolution. It makes me wonder why our school systems aren’t focused on such an event… almost all of the history we have been taught only deals with the U.S. and our involvement” (B.C., blog, 5/5). Their resulting lack of cultural literacy, some students determined, compromised their ability to read Persepolis. On the other hand, as a few pointed out, Satrapi may have counted on just these confusions: “[M]aybe this was also her intention, [to] have this book be a question that makes us search for answers” (K.A., blog, 5/9). In this way, assessing their own subjective responses became integral to

42 Students’ negotiations would seem to support claims that “the unique vocabulary and grammar of comics and cartoon drawing might produce an imaginative and ethical engagement with the proximity of the other” (Whitlock, 2006, p. 978).
analyzing Satrapi’s goals and audiences. As a result, even those who didn’t enjoy the text found it educational; for several, that meant it inspired them to educate themselves about Iranian history.\footnote{We also watched the film version and looked, briefly, at \textit{Persepolis 2.0}, a short adaptation of the memoir for the explicit purpose of raising awareness of the plight of Iranian citizens. These multiple variations on Satrapi’s story, each with its own contexts and paratexts, challenged students to consider the material and social forces at play in the production and distribution of texts.} This attention to interpretive processes made students self-conscious about their roles as audiences. As one wrote and others echoed, “When [I] first began the readings for class I was a completely different audience member than I am now. I think I am finally reading how the author intended us to” (Q.K., blog, 4/13). As I suggest below, that difference was connected to students’ own authorial insights about memoir and visual literacies.

\textbf{6.3 Rhetoric & Resources: Multimodal Design and Multiliteracies}

\textit{6.3.1 Comics as Collaboration: Minding the Gaps}

My original theoretical definition of communication as dialogic exchange found practical support in the medium of comics, which makes visible interpretation as an active process: audiences don’t just receive messages, they must decode meaning from a variety of cues. By demanding that audiences literally read between the lines to achieve “closure” (a term students used regularly), comics enlist audiences as “willing and conscious collaborators” (McCloud, 1993, p. 63, 65). This dynamic accorded well with students’ stated aversion to having everything spelled out for them; an effective memoir in this view was one that requires a little work, prompting audiences “to see the light for themselves rather than being talked down to and being told what to think” (I.M., essay). Others noted this is true only up to a point: “On the one hand I don’t want to be overly obvious, to where I don’t put any faith in my reader to fill in the gaps and make
connections but I don’t want to be so obscure that meaning is lost in too many possibilities of interpretation” (A.B., blog, 5/29). The challenges students faced while composing their micro-memoirs emphasized this tension:

In the future I won’t only read texts with emotions I feel but I will analyze what kind of emotions the author felt writing/illustrating and what they meant for the audience to feel. I will also think about who their intended audience was and how this changes the way I should be reading it… It will also help me be less critical of other authors. Until now, I never realized how hard it was to make your audience see what you see. (B.C., micro-memoir reflection)

Other students repeated this realization and linked it to another concern, that of their own visual literacies as composers.

6.3.2 Multimodal Self-representation: Literacies in Practice

Whereas reading primary texts reminded students of their already-existing visual literacies, the task of composing all-verbal and all-visual micro-memoirs presented a challenge. Many admitted they assumed the assignment would be simple: “I took the idea almost as a joke, thinking it would be the easiest English assignment I’d ever have to work on; little did I know I would end up spending more time constructing twelve items that could actively depict a story or idea” (Y.C., micro-memoir reflection). This surprise was echoed by many, as was the resulting self-consciousness about composing: “I have truly been fascinated by the difficulties that I have encountered throughout the span of this assignment” (V.A., micro-memoir reflection). For one thing, as students explained, they were far more used to having to write more rather than less. The verbal memoirs demanded detailed attention to diction and punctuation, but students were at least somewhat comfortable with those aspects “because that is how we have been trained
growing up in our reading classes. I think though to best get the message across you definitely need both [verbal and visual]” (R.J., blog, 5/2). That realization suggested a gap in their education: visual composing is important but rarely taught in school. As a result, most students found the 6-image memoir the most difficult part of the assignment, and some went further: “It challenged me in a way I have not been challenged in my writing background” (Q.K., blog, 5/3). In their reflections and blog comments, students regularly expressed both frustration and enjoyment of the process and results, often in the same sentence. The experience also highlighted the artificiality of a division between visual and verbal modes: “Overall, this assignment helped show me the limitations of using purely images or purely text. I kept finding myself thinking about how much better it would be to combine the two” as they exist in everyday texts (K.A., micro-memoir reflection). Turning towards their graphic memoirs, then, students were relieved to be combining modes, but they were also uncertain about their ability to do so successfully. As the memoirs discussed in the next section demonstrate, students often surprised themselves as they adapted and invented rhetorical resources to make and communicate meaning from memories.

7. Transformed Practice

The transformation of students’ narrative designs did not occur only in their final graphic memoirs, of course. It was an ongoing process that was neither linear nor smooth. Students’ anxieties and enthusiasm varied according to their confidence with technical tools as well as rhetorical options. The day I introduced ComicLife was a high point

44 By trying to isolate modes, they recognized the layered nature of multimodal meaning, that “[t]ext and picture together are not two ways of knowing the same thing; the text means more when juxtaposed with picture, and so does the picture when set beside the text” (Lemke, 2004, p. 77).
because the software is simple and fun to use; Photoshop was less intuitive but they sensed the possibilities for manipulation. The real problems arose as students began trying to envision nascent story ideas and explore the telling tools at their disposal. Students regularly expressed their enthusiasm about the project—“Yet, with all the excitement comes some anxiety too because I am a terrible artist” (K.A., blog, 5/23). During this exploration process, students spent a fair amount of time reassuring each other and themselves: “[I]t doesn’t matter how terrible the pictures look as long as they get your point across. Don’t let your lack of artistic talent hold you back from drawing if that's what you would prefer to do” (M.S., blog, 5/24). Some discovered unknown or long-forgotten talents for drawing; some considered staging scenes; many used a combination of photos, sketches, and maps (often manipulated by Photoshop or ComicLife or both) to create mixed-media memoirs.

Students’ concerns about visual resources were exacerbated by the issue of tellability: “I really can not find a legitimate reason for telling any of the stories I have come up with other than, ‘It's long enough.’” (K.S., blog, 5/19); “I really have no idea what story that would be considered worth telling. Any pictures I have are obviously significant to me but I don’t know if anyone else would care” (M.A., blog, 5/20). As a result, topics and forms were repeatedly revised: “[W]hen I went to write my proposal, nothing seemed to come out right and I started second guessing myself on whether or not my idea would make for a good story” (M.S., blog, 5/24). Eventually, each student (or, in two cases, pairs of students) settled a project in which they could balance a story worth telling and their own ability to tell it. The diversity of their final graphic memoirs suggests students’ adaptation of the project for their own ends. The compositions differed
greatly in terms of form and content, as did students’ design processes. Some focused on uncovering meaning in their past experiences, whereas others prioritized crafting messages for their audiences. And some were most interested in the experience itself, the opportunity to see what they could do.

I’ve selected the following examples in order to gesture to the variety of students’ purposes and the design choices that resulted. I have ordered these memoirs in terms of students’ intended audiences, working from the self outwards, and focused each analysis around different aspects of the narrative communication model in order to present a wide range of rhetorical moves. The first, untitled memoir exploits verbal narration and visual focalization to reconstruct one difficult day that dramatically changed the course of the author’s life. Writing, in the end, for her own understanding and healing, Kayan maintained her privacy while powerfully evoking the reverberations of that day in her present life. The next example, the light-hearted “Accelerated Friendships,” explores how a trip to Mexico influenced Caitlin’s social life and cultural learning. From an extensive personal photo archive, she constructed a story of collective growth to share with her friends and fellow students. Finally, Axel’s rhetorical agenda focused on developing a message for others from his own experience. His “Always Wear Your Helmet!” takes advantage of cues and construction in order to guide a general audience’s progression through his account of a childhood injury toward a final lesson. These graphic memoirs testify to students’ developing literacies and their engagement with the challenges of dialogic storytelling.
7.2 Kayan’s “Untitled”: Negotiating the Unnarratable

I begin by examining a graphic memoir that raises some of the core themes in autobiographical theory and personal narrative in composition studies: memory, self-construction, expressivism, self-disclosure, and empowerment. That seems like a heavy load for one comic, but the text under discussion is weighty. Kayan’s graphic memoir recounts one momentous day in her childhood:

When I was ten years old, my father, whom I had not seen in months, arrived at my home with his sisters and new wife, put me in a car without any explanation and drove us away. I did not understand what was going on or why my father would not allow me to take any of my things with me or why his girlfriend, the only mother figure in my life, was crying and would not allow him take me. All I remember was feeling really confused and angry at everyone around me. From that day forward, my life dramatically changed. The events that followed helped to shape me as the person that I am today. (proposal)\footnote{Kayan’s decision to address this memory related to a personal narrative of my own: “I chose this story for the graphic memoir project because of what you shared with us earlier about your father’s illness” (proposal). I had used this family drama as an example of a story that could perhaps only be told through images and gaps, for my own ethical comfort and rhetorical effect. I mention this here because it speaks to a subtext of this entire project: When we ask students to bring their extracurricular lives into the classroom, there is some value in sharing our own stories and, especially, modeling a critical approach.}

In her original proposal, Kayan declared her intention to wrap this story up neatly with a moral for the audience: “I will show how my early life has been about myself overcoming obstacles… The audience will respond to the rags-to-riches aspect of my story and the hope that the future will be a good one” (proposal). These plans changed as she spent weeks struggling not just to craft the narrative but to understand the events and their lasting impression. On more than one occasion, she considered switching topics to something more comfortable: “I was tempted to take the easy way out and simply retell a recent trip that I had taken. I was really scared that I wouldn’t be able to tell an important
story in a way that really captures what I was going through” (reflection). Kayan persevered in this task in large part because she felt that the graphic memoir form would allow her to communicate something she found difficult to verbalize: “It is a lot easier to show what you were experiencing at a particular time than trying to explain it in words” (proposal). Kayan’s experience telling this particular story was not necessarily easy, but she was aided by the resources of narration afforded by the comic form. By visually representing her present vantage point and offering only the barest of verbal explanation, these untitled narrative designs offer a strategically limited self-presentation in which Kayan controlled her self-disclosure while encouraging the (implied) audience to fill in the gaps on their own.

7.2.1 Kayan’s Narrative Occasion: Writing for the Self, toward an Other

Given the tellability of Kayan’s story, it might be expected that she would take an expansive view of its audience appeal, but she imagined the occasion of her telling as local, even internal. In her proposal, Kayan suggested her family and friends as a potential audience: “I find that when I try to explain this story to my parents or my friends, I sound a bit whiny. They cannot understand and I believe that it will be easier to simply show them” (proposal). Again, this optimism was tempered as she confronted her memories, design resources, and personal motivations. Kayan’s understanding of her rhetorical purpose changed significantly as she struggled with the events themselves and the challenge of representation:

As I worked on my memoir, I realized that my audience had changed. Before, I felt like this could be for me and anyone who has had a troubled childhood. Later, the story felt too personal to tell. I wanted it to be just for me. Due to this, I lost focus of my audience and my comic lacks many of the rhetorical strategies that
my previous composition had. In truth, it simply felt good to lay my story out.

(Reflection)

Although Kayan’s intended audience would be limited to just herself, she also knew I, at least, would be reading this piece. In this light, she seems to underestimate her own strategic choices, the rhetorical moves by which she controls the reader’s experience. The memoir begins abruptly, leaves much unexplained, and ends on an ambivalent note that challenges the audience to interpret its meaning. The author’s reserve demands greater audience involvement, an “intimacy… a silent, secret contract between creator and audience” (McCloud, 1993, p. 69). One gets the sense that the terse storyteller’s narratee would be discrete and respectful enough not to ask impertinent questions. The resulting ambiguity was a deliberate choice, one linked to Kayan’s decision to narrow her focus from childhood in general to just that one fateful day: “At first I thought that I would lose my purpose, but I didn’t. I felt like it might be more mysterious and have a greater impact with a shorter comic” (blog, 6/8). That sense of mystery, and its emotional effect, was made possible by Kayan’s manipulation of conventional comics narration for her particular authorial purposes.

7.2.2 Narration: Trauma, Tellability, and the Unnarratable

7.2.2.1 Self-narration through Multiple Selves… and Silence

Following the dominant conventions discussed in class, Kayan’s adult voice is contained to the text boxes at the top of (most) panels; although she planned to “use narration of the adult me to show the effects” of these events on her current life, the final version contains only spare explanation from the narrator (proposal). The opening line, “There wasn’t anything different about that day…” introduces a tension that piques
audience interest. Throughout the comic, the narrative voice offers the central facts that she lived with her father’s girlfriend until her father arrives to take her away. The narrator and the limited dialogue hint at a wealth of unexplained family drama: Janice “had a lot to hide”; a birth certificate has vanished; the car is full of unknown family. Kayan is forced to leave her home “with nothing.” She observes that the people in the car seem to know her and that they are going to see her grandmother, whom she also hasn’t met.

This minimal narration allows the audience to experience only the same amount of knowledge available to the child’s perspective: confusion in the face of adults’ inscrutable behavior and awareness of her own powerlessness. There is only one speech bubble across several more pages: Immediately after the narrator reveals that her father has been married two years “before I even knew her name,” the visual cue attributes to one of her aunts this (ironic) line: “Nice to finally be with your family, isn’t it Kayan?” In the penultimate panel, the narrator offers a bit of explanation: “I was shy at first. Then my dad’s wife gave me [a] drink. It was an American drink. I felt really special. I finally warmed up to her. My father joked that all I needed was a drink to become someone’s best friend.” On the next page, the narrator’s concluding evaluation is both direct and oblique: “I didn’t think much about that joke then. But now my father still jokes about it… I should never had drank it.” And on that bleak, blunt note, the memoir ends. In some ways, though, the audience’s work is just beginning—like the terse narrator, we remain in the gutter, trying to make meaning of it all. Of course, the reader’s experience does not rest on verbal elements alone; I divide them here only to highlight the tensions Kayan’s narrative designs establish and maintain.
7.2.2.2 Self-Representation through Unreliable Visual Narration

To accompany her verbal narration, Kayan designed a visual representation that seems to reflect the narrator’s present perspective. Kayan’s previous micro-memoirs, about childhood friends who grow apart, had suggested to her the potential for a visual narrative to be both highly emotional and still avoid the “danger of being too personal”; they also proved that it is “hard to explain certain events and feelings with images,” especially when working with stock photos (micro-memoir reflection). Without a family archive or confidence in her drawing ability, Kayan decided to recreate key events with actors, casting college-aged friends in the role of herself, her father, and her father’s girlfriend. For the first-time reader, there’s no way to know how old the experiencing-I is, nor a reason to question it, until the delayed reveal.\textsuperscript{46} The audience is asked to sympathize with the young woman: the narrator’s choppy explanations, the visual perspective that looms over her character, and the gesture of wiping a tear away illustrate the emotional stress she’s under. Despite the narrator’s verbal restraint, her visual representation offers an emotional connection to the audience, as when the young woman gazes sadly and directly at the camera as she is pulled from her home by her father.

This physical and psychological set-up results in a moment of visual shock when, on page 7 of 9, Kayan finally reveals a picture of herself with her father that day. The yellow shirt worn by the young woman actor provides the visual connection that allows the audience to recognize the protagonist in the small child. At once, the reader must reconfigure what came before to account for this physical reality, a move that also amplifies the emotional response. As Kayan noted, this decision to represent herself as a

\textsuperscript{46}A possible confusion here would be between Kayan-the-narrator and the actor who plays Kayan-the-character; she does not play herself.
child through a college-aged woman highlights “how certain things still affect me today” (reflection). Focalized through the present-day narrator’s vantage point, those childhood scenes merge past and present selves, the narrating-I and experiencing-I both still affected by the experience. The reveal brings home to the audience just how young Kayan was when these events transpired. On the same page she also slips in the Jamaican setting and the child’s awareness of some kind of power differential. For two pages, the audience glimpses the real players in this family drama. The visual medium changes again for the final, single-panel page, on which appears the comics’ one hand-drawn image, a soda bottle knocked over, its last drops spilling on the page between the narration: “I didn’t think much about that joke then. But now my father still jokes about it. I should never had drank it.” At this, the final gutter opens, leaving the audience and character in “limbo” trying to make sense of it all (McCloud, 1993, p. 66). The reticence of the visual and verbal narration ensures that the audience is both detached from the author’s personal reflections and commanded to fill in the interpretive gaps.

7.2.3 Critical Framing: The Tellable & The Unnarratable

Considered in light of students’ collective critical framing, Kayan’s “Untitled” reveals the complexity of her rhetorical negotiations. The question of self-positioning is particularly interesting in this text. Whereas most students used the visible distinction between the experiencing-I and narrating-I to prove how different, how much more mature their present selves were, Kayan resisted that neat dividing line. Instead, she deliberately played with time and identity, manipulating her visual narration and restricting her verbal narration to match the child’s limited knowledge—at least until that final page and her retrospective judgment. The effect demonstrates the persistence of this
past in the present and perhaps future negotiation of her regrets over that early capitulation to emotional bribery. Like the story itself, the process of telling it reverberated through Kayan’s life: “This had led me to talk about that day with my father after I have completed my comic. Discussing it again with my father has brought up a lot of other feelings that I had to leave out of my comic. I did not want it to be full of narration and I did not feel comfortable writing it down knowing that someone will read it” (reflection). Even as it highlights the emotional stakes of such work, Kayan’s composing process also suggests that the graphic memoir genre may offer both the opportunity for personal reflection and growth—and a degree of self-determination about how much to share with audiences.

In this way Kayan’s graphic memoir reflects a tension between tellability and narratability. Building upon Gerald Prince’s (1987) definition, Robyn Warhol (1994) explains the unnarratable as “that which cannot be narrated because it is too tedious or too obvious to say; that which is taboo, in terms of social convention, literary convention, or both; and that which purportedly cannot be put into words because it exceeds or transcends the expressive capacities of language” (n.p.). In the case of Kayan’s memoir, we might extend this notion of the unnarratable to mean that which an author or narrator does not fully understand and/or is not ready or willing to share. Kayan’s story, she knew, was highly tellable, a combination of the unique and the relatable: the experience of being at the whim of inexplicable grown-ups, the resulting feelings of powerlessness and disorientation. But she was still working to understand the trauma of her past experience
and its continuing reverberations. So although she considered the narrative worth telling for her own sake, she was unwilling to fully communicate the insights and emotions it raised. In this light, the deliberate gutters of graphic memoir can perhaps offer reassurance to teachers and students concerned about self-disclosure. The amount of revelation in such texts can vary greatly, and the act of making those strategic decisions can help students feel control over communication.

In some respects, Kayan’s experience bears out the value of expressivist pedagogies: she worked to develop a voice that accords with her developing identity and wrote this composition, in the end, for herself. She found value in the experience, admitting that although she “panicked a little” when she learned of our course topic, “I am happy that I stayed in the class. It was a whole new experience and I enjoyed it. I feel like if there was a chance to take a class similar to this one, I would do it because now I know what it takes” (blog, 6/8). This confidence resulted from her development of new visual literacies but also from her ability to engage in self-reflection and conscious self-presentation. Some might argue that the kinds of issues Kayan was dealing with don’t belong in the college classroom, that this kind of self-disclosure presents risks that outweigh their educational rewards. I would suggest, though, that the narrative communication model and critical framing enabled Kayan to achieve a degree of self-determination over her narrative. The presence of that implied audience (and me as

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47 Recent criticism of graphic memoir has highlighted its particular potential for representing trauma (Chute, 2010; Micciche, 2004). As Hilary Chute (2010) notes, “the cross-discursive form of comics is apt for expressing that difficult register… the force of graphic narrative’s intervention, on the whole, attaches to how it pushes on conceptions of the unrepresentable” (p. 2).

48 The ethics of soliciting students’ secrets by demanding personal writing remain worthy of discussion (Morgan, 1998; Berman, 2001; Lucas, 2007), but as Thomas Newkirk (1997) points out, these complaints are notably absent in students’ own responses to personal writing assignments.

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actual) challenged Kayan to move beyond self-reflection and toward the resources available for controlled self-presentation. More importantly, she was planning to keep working on it: “I will definitely keep mine. I think that I will even go beyond that. I plan on doing a little more with my comic” (blog, 6/8). Kayan’s submission of the ‘final’ version during our course reflected its status as a work-in-progress: “Even though I know that I have accomplished a lot I can’t help feeling like I could have done more. I guess that’s natural. But at least I know what I can do in the future” (blog, 6/8). By tackling this personal story, Kayan may have come to terms (or not) with a troubling past. But more importantly, from an educational standpoint, the act of designing this narrative demonstrated, again for herself most of all, her rhetorical multiliteracies and the strategic communication they enable.

7.3 Caitlin’s “Accelerated Friendships”: Crafting Memories into Meaning

“Accelerated Friendships: My Christmas Break in the Yucatán” recounts a school-sponsored trip to Mexico in which Caitlin developed strong friendships while, to her surprise, learning a lot about globalization issues. From the start, Caitlin indicated that she wasn’t really sure what made this experience and the resulting relationships so powerful but figured she would “discover” this meaning as she “sift[ed] though” her “primary sources” (proposal). Gathering her own and friends’ memories and photos, Caitlin sought to discover meaning in this story that she recognized as tellable and then to tell it in a way that would matter to her audiences. This process of research eventually became indistinguishable from that of revision:

I actually wasn’t even aware of my topic until the piece came together. I finished the memoir, thought of something else I wanted to include, and then would go
back in and change almost everything. I know that I have heard [of] when authors’ drafts hardly resemble the final piece, and I now understand why. Part of the creative process is to continue to reevaluate your work so that you force yourself to pull something better and more worthwhile out of your story.

By the time she was done, Caitlin had designed the story to share the insights she gained while reflecting on the experience. Exploiting conventional comics narration, she places her present-day narrator in text boxes while the action unfolds within the frame. This verbal guidance, along with speech and thought bubbles, shapes already-existing vacation photos into a story about friendship, culture, and collaborative learning. The affordances of mixed-media memoir enabled a realistic but reflective representation of the characters, events, and setting: “I think that there is no other way I could tell the story of my Mexican study abroad trip. Graphic memoir worked perfectly with the story I was trying to tell” (reflection). Caitlin’s revisions of this story, and the vision she offered the audience, bring to vivid life an unexpected educational experience with multiple available meanings.

7.3.1 Caitlin’s Narrative Occasion: Imagining Other Learners

The implied audience for Caitlin’s memoir was different from the actual audiences (her friends) with whom she planned to share the piece. Throughout the process, she expressed a desire to “write the memoir with a purpose. I don't want people to read it and say who cares or why is she telling this?” (blog, 5/31). This emphasis on tellability resulted in a design process that yielded personal insights but looked beyond herself to discover a story worth sharing with others. In her proposal, Caitlin indicated a
specific target audience of “students thinking of embarking on one of these short term study tours” and multiple purposes:

I will use my memoir to do two things. The first is to show how this is such a great opportunity to make friends and get out of your comfort zone… The other thing I wish to accomplish won’t be so obvious because this memoir is focused on the beginning and strengthening of friendship. I hope to advertise these study abroad trips and show the plethora of things you are able to see and do in a situation such as this. Not only are all of the pictures taken in gorgeous places with famous landmarks, it will also make the audience realize how many things can be accomplished in a study abroad trip through OSU. (proposal)

The particularity of that narrative occasion shaped Caitlin’s rhetorical choices. Addressing similarly situated students, she relied on their identification with her initial anxiety, resistance to schoolwork, and celebration of drinking and dancing with friends. She used this connection to suggest to the potential for personal growth and global awareness in unexpected forms. With these goals in mind, Caitlin employed dissonant self-narration (Cohn, 1984) to communicate the perspective gained by her current vantage point: “I have now been able to reflect on the trip and using the narration boxes, I feel as if I ask the audience for a level of respect” (reflection). In turn, she respected her implied audience’s resistance to overt moralizing by focusing on the story and letting them interpret its implications for themselves.

7.3.2 The Story: Geographical, Emotional, and Intellectual Journeys
7.3.2.1 Characters: Narrating and Experiencing Development

As her assessment of the rhetorical situation indicates, Caitlin recognized the centrality of her own self-characterizations for inviting audience identification and earning their attention. These dual characterizations are established on the first page,
along with the evaluative distance between her experiencing-I and narrating-I. The first panel, which dominates the page, offers a view from an airplane window with a thought bubble expressing her unseen character’s regrets about deciding to spend her holiday away from home; the next panel offers a glimpse of blue water below while the narrator gently mocks those concerns. In this way, the audience is positioned alongside the evaluative narrator, permitted to poke a bit of fun at her younger self while recognizing her current maturity. The verbal narration establishes a connection directly with the audience over the characters’ heads: “A large advantage of this type of work was that while I could make the characters act one way in the scene, I was able to show how without realizing it, they were learning even while trying to oppose it” (reflection). This development is collective: Immediately upon landing and meeting her companions, the narration shifts from “I” to “we,” a plural voice that lasts until the final page. Within the story, Caitlin herself becomes indistinguishable from her new friends; the audience would be hard-pressed to pick her out in the crowd. This experiencing-we becomes the developing protagonist whose shared experience the narrative documents.

Representing this plural protagonist, the comic focuses on the collective experience rather than individual characters. Caitlin strikes a balance between their “typical American tourist” enjoyment of tequila, shopping, and dancing and their dawning realization of the connection between those activities and the globalization issues they were studying. In early pages, speech and thought bubbles attribute complaints about the academic component to these characters while the narration explains their resistance: “It’s not that we weren’t interested in learning; it just didn’t seem like globalization was something we could study while enjoying ourselves. We
were about to be proven wrong.” This process of character development is narrated over vibrant images, some candid and some in which characters seem to look and speak directly to the viewer. Despite early fears about the constraint of using only photos (due to her professed lack of artistic ability), Caitlin discovered an unexpected benefit in that “the posed pictures seemed as if they were actually speaking to the audience. The eye contact with the camera is a way that the characters are able to be in direct contact with audience” (reflection). This relationship is reinforced by the thoughts and words attributed to these characters, which allowed Caitlin “to develop the characters more in the text bubbles than in the narration” (reflection). Such verbal and visual cues reinforce their sense of fun and adventure as well as their respectful attention to the local guides, the professor, and local culture. The narrator both comments on her fellow travelers’ initial ignorance and avoidance of academic work and gives them credit for an evolving recognition of their own roles within globalization: “By the end, we appear completely changed, the best of friends with a large understanding of what the class was truly about” (reflection). The characters, especially the narrator, are drawn as relatable models for the audience: open to new experiences, relationships, and real-world learning opportunities.

7.3.2.2 Plot & Setting: Adventures in and around Education

Whereas the characters are represented more or less generally, with a collective personality, the memoir highlights the specificity of their experiences in this particular setting. From the start, Caitlin recognized that her greatest challenge would be selection: “I am trying to do my memoir on an 11 day trip to Mexico and while it seems that that is not too long, I feel as if I could write a 300 page memoir on all that happened. I am

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49 Caitlin also played up the Buckeye pride, a common move of identification among OSU students, as will be evident in Chapter 3.
having a little trouble pulling the focus onto something specific in the trip rather than the
I went here, we did that, we saw that” (blog, 5/31). The process of distilling that wealth
of resources into a coherent story for the audience also served to clarify its meaning for
the author. Caitlin’s resulting choices transformed what could be a trite ‘what I did on my
vacation’ narrative into a narrative that tracks the characters’ literal and metaphorical
journeys—from Ohio to Mexico, strangers to friends, slackers to learners. From the start,
the narrator marks the narrative as progressive; the audience can sense the positive
change coming. Although the detailed schedule reproduced (in part) on the third page
delineates specific events, the comic provides a more general trajectory: a few days of
relaxation, a rude awakening when work intrudes, and the gradual realization that there
are direct connections between work and play.

Throughout, Caitlin’s representation of the Mexican setting grounds the learning
experience in a specific place and time. All of the images (except for the last, in her
father’s car after the trip home) are authentic to the travels, a point made on the second
page when the narrator offers a close-up of the tour bus’s welcome sign for Ohio State
University. To communicate the power of her surroundings, Caitlin chose to “keep the
transformation of the pictures to a minimum since they already have a gorgeous
background, no manipulation needed” (proposal). From “over 500 images” (blog, 5/20)
she selected images to represent particular incidents like climbing the steps of a Mayan
temple, repeated activities including a whole page filled with shots of the characters
dancing, and core themes, as when pesos bleed off a page filled with images of their
spending that “contributed to the Mexican economy.” The importance of place and time
is reinforced in the final sequence of pages: a long, slow sunset followed by a sudden
transition back to the snow of Ohio winter. This final movement, reinforced by contrasting colors and effects, serves to emphasize the continuation of the story beyond the bounds of the narrative. As her character recounts her adventures to her father, “I broke frame… to show that the speech did not stop where the page stopped, but kept going throughout the trip and on” (reflection). This continuation invites the audience to imagine the ongoing effects of this past on the character-narrator’s present and future.

7.4 Critical Framing: Authorial Insights and Audience Involvement

Caitlin struggled a bit with the tension between clear communication and audience involvement. After the micro-memoir, she had observed, “Until now, I never realized how hard it was to make your audience see what you see” (reflection). When she turned to the graphic memoir, then, she was relieved to be able to combine verbal and visual elements and thereby strike a balance between authorial guidance and the gaps that prompt audience’s active interpretation. In this, she recognized, she was more or less successful with different elements: “I tried not to overdo the narration by taking some of the pressure off of it and allowing the characters in the pictures to describe a lot through their words. This move was a way to try to demand a little audience participation by allowing them to use context in attempts to understand what is going on” (reflection).

Nevertheless, the final memoir verbalizes (over corresponding images) the results of her own evaluation: “For eleven days we learned so much about the Yucatan, so much about each other, and so much about ourselves. Maybe it was because we had great educators, or maybe it was because we were surrounded in culture; all that mattered was that we learned it together.” This summation, even with its neat emotional wrap-up, remains tentative and thereby invites the audience to provide its own closure. That lack of finality
is reinforced in the last page of the memoir, wherein Caitlin’s excited account of her adventure to her father bleeds off the page. The lessons of her ongoing interpretation—the value of traveling outside comfort zone, looking beneath the surface, learning how to learn—likewise remain in the gutters for the audience to determine for themselves (or not).

In the final days of the course, Caitlin wrote, “I am actually thinking of printing out a copy of mine to keep it. I documented a trip that I never had all the pictures of developed and I think this would be a great way to remember it” (blog, 6/4). Her surprised tone reflects not just the value she found in this process and the final project, but the rarity of that valuation of an assignment beyond the grade. I point this out because it suggests possible benefits that accrue when students study their own lives and, more to the point, their learning processes. It might be suspected that Caitlin’s attention to learning in this memoir grew out of a desire to give me as the teacher what (she thinks) I want. And that may be true, but only to a point. It’s possible that were she to tell this story outside of the context of this course, the metalearning theme might have been less prominent. But Caitlin’s process of designing this graphic memoir involved repeated analysis and assessment of that trip’s meaning, for herself as well as her audience. Even if she had not been conscious of the educational subtext before this composition, she certainly is now.

A flashback will help support this claim through contrast: Caitlin’s earlier micro-memoirs narrated her frustration with counterproductive educational methods. After studying extensively and well for a chemistry exam, she had received the average (near failing) grade, resulting in frustration and feelings of powerlessness:
I studied each and every problem, over and over. I learned, not memorized. I understood every word in the notes; I could have taught the damn class. I stayed up all night driving the formulas into my skull. I drank more coffee than is healthy. I did this all to myself just to see I got the average?! I guess I should just give up now. (micro-memoir)

This vortex of failure was made visible in the final image of her 6-image version; as the knowledge and effort, represented by her study notes, “is thrown away, it is being sucked away” into a black-and-white spiral vortex (micro-memoir reflection). Caitlin’s view of conventional methods of teaching and assessment was, to say the least, rather critical at this point in her college career. So the decision to focus her graphic memoir on a very different kind of learning experience suggests another level of meaning, at least for her and me, to that narrative. For Caitlin, the memoir process was one in which she honed her literacies while pursuing deeper knowledge: “Especially now that I have time to reflect back on the trip, I am understanding the lessons I learned. Not only did I create a memoir for an audience to see, I also was able to use this creation to learn more about myself” (reflection). Her graphic memoir provides an illustrative counterpoint to her previous memoirs: from failure and frustration with objective assessment, she turned to a story of collaborative learning through real-life experiences. Much of what Caitlin learned in our class, as in her trip to the Yucatán, was how—and how well—she learned through educational experiences in which an externally assigned grade is not the real mark of success.

Perhaps another reason she didn’t push her story to clarify its celebration of immersive, experiential learning was because Caitlin’s implied and actual audiences were different. Although she composed the text as if for any college student considering travel
abroad, she planned to circulate it in a much narrower sphere: her friends on the trip and perhaps her parents, who already knew the broad strokes of the story. In that case, her decision to raise those possibilities—“Maybe it was because we had great educators, or maybe it was because we were surrounded in culture”—without answering them can be seen as a dialogic move, one intended to initiate further discussion. This possibility becomes more probable in light of the class’s early survey responses about rhetoric and influence: According to students, personal experiences most influence the way they think and act, followed by conversations with friends and family and, less so, social networking; the kinds of text they claim to use most often to influence others are face-to-face conversations. With these beliefs in mind, perhaps Caitlin’s intention to distribute the text locally, in face-to-face conversation or even on Facebook, reflects a sense that these issues of learning (and teaching) are worth talking about: not that she has answers, but that she’d like to raise the questions. In this light, Caitlin’s graphic memoir reflects an ongoing process of looking back in order to move forward.

7.4 Axel’s “Always Wear Your Helmet!”: Offering Hard-earned Lessons

The final example I’ll share, like many other students’ memoirs, recounts a vivid childhood memory. For Axel, this meant recreating a major snowboarding accident: “Breaking my leg definitely stands out as one of the defining moments in my short existence on this planet. This experience drastically altered my life not only during the injury but shaped my life as a whole and continues to affect me” (reflection). He knew the story was both tellable and well suited to the comic medium: “For one, the whole breaking a bone story is one that many people have experienced in their lives. Also, due to the physical nature of the event, many of the elements would be more interesting if
depicted graphically rather than purely with word” (proposal). These comments suggest Axel’s confidence about his rhetorical agenda, but he was less sure of his functional visual literacies. Without the option of personal photos, he found himself in a “dilemma”: “I think I am going to draw so I can express more with people’s bodies and faces but am afraid that people with discredit my work because of the terrible artistic quality” (blog, 5/23). The question of stick-figures was the subject of several blog conversations in which students brought up McCloud’s (1993) notion of “amplification through simplification,” the idea that audiences can more easily identify with abstract visual representations than detailed realism (p. 30). As “[t]he most general interpretation of the human form possible,” stick figures were deemed a valid option (Q.K., blog, 5/18). So, like a few others, Axel drew basic illustrations and thereby, like many, discovered unexpected benefits resulting from supposed constraints: “My lack of artistic skill was actually somewhat handy though as it was able to clearly show these images were from the past, as noted by the elementary level look” (reflection). To emphasize his current vantage point, the memoir frames the story as a flashback, with photographs of his present-day self providing evaluative narration. Axel’s attention to cues and construction, and the narrative progression that results, reflected his goal to communicate a clear message out of a more complicated experience.

7.4.1 Axel’s Narrative Occasion: Casual Chat among Friends

Having established early the story he wanted to tell, Axel proceeded to imagine an occasion for that telling. At first, he had conceived of his audience as young people and snowboarders, like him, who would relate to the accident; later, he expanded the audience to include “any mature person who isn’t offended by a little somewhat off-hand humor”
This identification of humor as a key resource reveals Axel’s eventual goal of converting “one the most terrible and life-changing events” of his life into an entertaining story with a message for the audience (reflection). The persuasiveness of this account would depend, he recognized, on his layered self-characterization: “I hope through my humor and graphic depiction I can also get the audience to relax and trust me, building my ethos, yet relate to the terrible pain I experienced” (proposal). Part of his strategy involved letting the audience see his narrating-I rather than including only his verbal voice in text boxes. In the opening and closing pages, photographs of Axel directly address the audience in speech bubbles while performing characterizing actions: playing frisbee with an unseen friend, camping on the beach. In this way Axel exploited the rhetorical effect of “an author appearing amid the panels of his narrative, looking us in the eye, and delivering heartfelt testimony about him- or herself” (Versaci, 2007, p. 39). These scenes establish a casual, fun-loving personality, one interested in sharing the wisdom earned through his own trials. They also position the narratee as a sympathetic listener, a role the implied audience is invited to share.

7.4.2 Constructing the Message: Direct Address and Playful Progression

7.4.2.1 Beginning: Setting up the Story, Establishing the Relationship

“Always Wear Your Helmet!” places its message right up front in the most privileged of positions, above a picture of metal rods on an x-ray folder. This paratext “immediately creates a sense of intrigue and suspense for the audience because already they know someone is going to get hurt” (reflection). The name of the author matches the label on the folder, indicating that the titular moral results from personal experience. This exposition informs the audience that the memoir will be about injury and, presumably,
recovery, a hypothesis that is confirmed on the first page where the author-narrator-protagonist appears, healthy and active, directly addressing the audience while he plays frisbee. The performed informality and the commonplace—that young people think they are invincible—with which the comic begins initiates a friendly, equitable relationship with the audience. The second panel, in which Axel says, “I vividly remember the fateful day I finally learned the truth,” establishes the narrative’s instability—When and how does the injury occur?—and tension—What’s the relationship among those metal rods, the advice offered in the title, and the story Axel is about to share? With strategic delay, Axel directs the audience’s entrance into the narrative, incorporating what he called “an element of suspense and foreshadowing” designed to maintain audience interest (reflection). These establishing shots invite the audience to “relax and trust” the present-tense narrator (reflection), who is then confined to text boxes over illustrations of the action. The beginning of this narrative takes just three panels (including the title page) and remains outside of the narrative world, at the level of readerly dynamics. The interaction between Axel and the audience seems as important to his rhetorical agenda as the story he’s about to relate.

7.4.2.2 Middle: Constructing Tension through Narrating-I and the Audience’s Eye

The rest of the memoir, until the final page, pairs child-like crayon drawings with retrospective verbal narration; in both linguistic and visual modes, the older, wiser narrator observes his foolish younger self as the audience awaits the inevitable crash. The first few pages are devoted to exposition, setting the scene and establishing character through the boys’ excited slang and occasional swearing, and his father’s tolerance broken only by one quick, stern “Language.” Throughout, Axel sprinkles his narration
with references to his characters’ youth and his own perspective on “back then.” The
voyage is slow but simple: the audience is just waiting for the inevitable. As the boys
finally hit the slopes, the character Axel considers lending his helmet to Max instead of
wearing it himself but changes his mind: “I remembered those words I had heard a
million times, ‘Always wear your helmet!’ I think my mom has yelled this at me at least
once a day as I ran out the door. This time I actually listened.” Still, the narrator doesn’t
give too much away: “The audience is left wondering what is going to happen, why is
this helmet so important… and wanting to read to find out what happens next”
(reflection). This foreshadowing weighs over the next few idyllic panels in which the
stick figures wear big smiles amid trees and snowflakes. Finally, Axel’s character
expresses his determination to “hit the big jump line,” a suggestion his friend resists. The
narrator is silent over this panel, leaving the audience primed for the climactic scene on
the next page.

The visual design of that scene trumps, at first, the verbal narration. The eye of
the audience can’t help but be drawn to the four long vertical panels in which Axels’ stick
figure floats in the air. Only after registering that slow-motion drama does the eye return
to the top of the page to read Axel’s dramatic, somewhat disparaging account of his
characters’ actions: “So off I went, no speed checks, balls to the walls, without even
checking the takeoff first.” The rapid pace of this narration is slowed by a memory of “a
kid walking up the hill as I was going into takeoff.” The panels below work like slow-
motion: in four tall panels, the stick figure leaves the jump, launches into the air, and
hangs there long enough to think “Oh shit, this is gonna hurt.” Those moment-to-moment
transitions as he flies through the air stretch that timing out, allowing the audience to
enter the gutters and the character’s head as he falls silently over an almost peaceful scene. The visual narration relies on spatial and gestural cues: “As I am going through the air, one will note the definite change in my facial expression from happy to extreme worry” (reflection). And on the next page, “the pinwheel eyes and crooked mouth that I have to show my state of pain and daze.” The jagged stick leg in subsequent scenes is also remarkably effective at suggesting shock and pain, as is the extended “Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh” speech bubble.

7.4.3.2 Ending: An Ambiguous but Firm Farewell

With this dramatic climax begins the final exposition in which Axel goes to the hospital and learns his fate. The moment of arrival comes with the nurse’s remark, “Without that helmet you wouldn’t be here,” followed by the doctor’s explanation that Axel’s broken femur will be repaired using two metal rods, which appear via real x-rays on the following page: one of the cracked femur and one of the rods pulling the bone’s pieces back together. This stark page, with no narrative commentary, provides a silent moment of harsh reality that concludes the memory. With these revelations, narrator and narratee arrive at the resolution of both instabilities and tensions, leaving only Axel-the-narrator’s conclusion. He once again appears as his grown-up self on a beach hike to explain that, in fact, the comic’s ending was “really only the start of the most painful and trying experience of my life.” This verbal content is somewhat at odds with decidedly upbeat visual narration. In the final image Axel stands with arms raised victoriously alongside a crowded final speech bubble that calls his recovery process “fruitless” because a cleft in the repaired femur caused it to break again the next summer. Squeezed into the bottom of that oversized speech bubble is Axel’s final farewell, the lesson he
takes from the experience: “Look before you leap and life’s tough. Always wear a helmet, literally and figuratively.” In his reflection, Axel commented on those crowded final moments: “I felt like I had too much to tell, and the fact was I really did.” He had written and excised “several other pages on recovery and therapy” only to cut anything that detracted from “the moral of the story” (reflection). But that tension remains apparent in the final panel, which visually and verbally acknowledges that the real story continues even as this constructed narrative is concluded. For all the clarity of his communication, Axel finally leaves the audience to provide their own closure of the new gaps he’s just opened.

7.4.4 Critical Framing: Self-presentation and Authority

Like Kayan and Caitlin, Axel used his graphic memoir to explore a past experience as well as practice strategies of rhetorical self-representation. The process itself was therapeutic: “Finally composing a tangible piece of work about my traumatic accident has acted to help lift a weight off my shoulder” (reflection). Moreover, the final product captured an important aspect of his identity that can be presented to others: “I now have a written story I can share with friends, family, and possibly future children to help explain to them who I am and why I am like I am” (reflection). This reference to an actual audience may explain Axel’s intimate yet distanced narration choices that craft a memoir less about self-representation than public self-presentation. This experience seemed to confirm that not only does he have stories worth telling but also that he has unexpected literacies, more available means of persuasion at his disposal than he might have thought.
Axel’s comments towards the end of the course support such an interpretation. Excited at what he’d learned about the rhetorical affordances of graphic memoir and inspired to think about his past experiences in new ways, he declared himself ready to pursue narrative designs outside of the classroom:

Of all the things I have been able to get out this final assignment though, the one that I feel the most is a want to write more about my experiences. This may sound somewhat selfish, but doing this assignment has really made me desire to share my experiences in more than just a verbal manner. I am now contemplating writing a work on all the events and experiences I have had in Northern Michigan and their effect on my life. (reflection)

The rhetorical strategies Axel adopted in his graphic memoir—a friendly narrator, visual and verbal humor, careful pacing, and dramatic construction—suggested the array of multimodal resources at his command, leaving him eager to explore them further. He’d also gained insight into the potential for serious influence through comics: “In a world today filled with traumatic events such as the conflicts in the Middle East and the recent Gulf of Mexico oil disaster, it will be interesting to see if others follow this trend and create graphic works to document and explain their personal trials to friends, family, and beyond” (reflection). This consideration of the multiple publics who might be influenced by graphic memoir concluded Axel’s reflection on the project, indicating that his own rhetorical designs are ongoing. I want to point out that I am not judging Axel’s work as aesthetically or ethically superior to the others. In fact, its relatively heavy hand, which leaves few gaps for the audience to fill, makes it less dialogic, less participatory. His memoir demonstrated a healthy degree of rhetorical awareness and creative invention, but it also relied upon a classic move of conventional personal narrative assignments: tacking
a neat moral on a complex story.\textsuperscript{50} This may suggest a drawback of an explicitly rhetorical approach to autobiographical compositions, that it seems to demand a specific message and can therefore direct authors away from richness and ambiguity toward simplification. As I discuss in the conclusion and later in this dissertation, such a constraint may be connected to the genre of memoir regardless of medium. Before turning to my assessment, however, I look to students’ own comments as a way to reflect upon the affordances and constraints of graphic memoir in composition courses.

8. Conclusion

As the preceding analyses suggest, graphic memoir offers composition studies a useful vehicle to forefront the social construction of identity and the interactive dynamics of communication. More specifically, as the Critical Framing section explained, students’ negotiations of narrative rhetoric provided insights into the complexities of author-audience dynamics and the multimodal resources of self-presentation. Students’ consequent transformed practice, as represented in their compositions and reflections, suggests the potential of graphic memoir to foster “visual critical literacies” by guiding students toward

1) understanding that a text is not a transparent window on reality, but is constructed;
2) developing and demonstrating rhetorical awareness both as a composer of text and as a reader of text; and
3) developing agency as a communicator and as a reader, rather than opting for the passivity that our popular media environment makes so easy. (Duffelmeyer & Ellerton, 2005, n.p.)

\textsuperscript{50} For related discussions of the benefits and drawbacks of encouraging students to craft meaningful personal essays, see Hesse, 1987, 1994 and Heilker, 1996.
In this concluding section, rather than attempt to address the pedagogical value of graphic memoir on a broad scale, I pursue the first follow-up question indicated in my introduction: *What did these particular students take away from this particular course?* The answers, of course, vary from student to student (as from course to course), but the commonalities speak to certain outcomes of the pedagogical approach outlined here. Likewise, although the evidence I offer below is specific to this class, these findings also gesture towards students’ learning experiences—or, more accurately, their assessment thereof—in the courses/chapters that follow. (Conversely, issues of interest not engaged here will likely be covered in the conclusions to later chapters that address the questions, *What can composition teachers take away from these rhetorical approaches to narrative?* and *What can composition studies take away from students’ rhetorical narratives?*) After establishing students’ primarily positive responses, I consider what they leave out and what those omissions indicate about their learning priorities and our pedagogical responsibilities. For students and for me, “Illustrating Lives” offered a place to start re-envisioning literacy learning and narrative rhetoric.

**8.1 Students’ Major Findings and Final Lessons**

**8.1.1 Reconsidering the Writing Requirement**

As I noted in the section on situated practice, many students expressed their surprise at an academic course devoted to comics. Initial assumptions that this class would be easy or inconsequential did not anticipate the challenges students encountered while analyzing and composing graphic memoirs. Even as they struggled with technical and conceptual frustrations, students expressed relief at finding a course that they “actually” (a telling and frequently used adverb) enjoyed and found intellectually
stimulating. For many students, the effect was to highlight a perceived contrast between this and conventional writing courses:

- “Most English classes are all about writing papers and analyzing someone else’s work. It was a nice change to be able to create something of my own and analyze my process and the final product. The fact that we were able to intertwine art and language in an English project rather than create another 5 page plain text paper is what made this project so enjoyable” (B.K., blog, 5/9).
- “[T]his project was actually an enjoyable experience and didn’t feel like work at all; why can’t all schoolwork work like this??” (I.M., blog, 6/7).
- “Typically by the end of a quarter I am jumping for joy knowing that a class is coming to a close but with this class, that is not the case. I have quite a few other english courses to take for my education major concentrated in english and I am dreading the fact that those other classes will be set up and constructed differently than this one” (V.A., blog, 5/25).
- “I love every assignment we’ve done in here. They actually allow me to really use my creativity instead of just bullshitting research paper after research paper” (G.S., blog, 5/30).
- “I totally agree this class is structured in a way in which the work doesn’t feel like work at all… too bad this class is over and we have to take another mundane class again in its place in the fall” (I.M., blog, 6/6).
- “The rhetorical skills I’ve learned have improved my overall literacy in English and that to me would be the main point in any English class” (Y.C., blog, 5/30).

Whereas some students indicated the value they found in writing about subjects that mattered to them personally, the majority seemed to be more won over by the medium of comics and the unique communication challenges it presents. This does not mean that the narrative aspect was inconsequential to their learning, but rather that students seemed to take for granted the familiar memoir genre while experimenting with medium. This element of experimentation seemed to be a key consideration of students’ judgments of
the course. Whereas they discovered unexpected challenges and occasional frustrations, students also indicated their valuation of the results: not just the comics themselves but the process of playing with verbal and visual resources of self-presentation.

8.1.2 Identifying and Remediying Literacy Gaps

As a result of their self-conscious struggles, a subtext of the course’s learning process was students’ awareness of learning as a process, one that offered new perspectives on literacy development within and outside formal education. As they worked with visual media, students also came to discover areas in which their literacy skills were underdeveloped or underappreciated. Throughout the course, there was a lot of negativity about their artistic abilities, some anxiety about software, and (as I’ll discuss below) doubts about the quality of their final products. This uncertainty was beneficial to some degree: students reassured each other and offered advice, and they rose to the challenges with ingenuity. At the same time, though, most recognized an area in need of attention: “I think this quarter has just open the educational door to become more visually literate” (survey). In these comments and class discussions, students indicate some awareness of the fact that “our educational system has failed to take seriously and to adequately respond to” the primacy of visual communication in everyday life (Hill, 2004, p. 108). Caitlin’s (and other students’) use of these assignments to explore past educational experiences suggests that comics might be usefully integrated into the popular literacy narrative assignments engaged in Chapter 4. Such metalearning—an analytic perspective on their own education—seems an essential contribution to a genuinely critical literacy and student agency.
8.1.3 Locating Rhetoric in Unexpected Places

Looking critically and analytically at underexamined, seemingly trivial texts like comics seemed to expand students’ understanding of what ‘counts’ as rhetoric. For some, this meant recognizing the rhetorical potential of graphic memoirs in particular: “I wasn’t even aware of the medium of graphic memoir and had never heard of this being done. As we learn about it, I see how effective it can be” (B.C., blog, 4/12). Other students noted that lack of knowledge might cause people to miss out on “a genre I believe most of our population will never know. This is a sad truth because after learning what we have this genre proves to be a great resource for conveying a story to your audience” (Q.K, blog, 5/26). More broadly, many students suggested that these investigations attuned them to the presence of rhetoric in everyday life:

- “I must admit that until this class I never paid much attention to rhetoric and its role in my everyday life. Since this class, however, I find myself analyzing almost everything I do. I’ve been noticing the way that my attitude and actions change in accordance with my surroundings. I have also been paying much more attention to rhetoric in my other classes” (B.K., blog, 5/16).

- “[W]hen I would tell people about our course subject I got the same response everytime... ‘Your english class is about comics?!’ I can say I would have said the same thing before entering this class, but it is so interesting to me to learn about the things which are not thought of in everyday life or by everyone” (Q.K., blog, 4/13).

- “Every time I read a text now, I find myself looking for little rhetorical cues and analyzing the text instead of simply just reading it” (K.A., blog, 5/16).

- “Now that I have created my own memoirs, I think that I will always be looking beyond what I read. I will see if there is an alternate message and will continue to be critical” (G.K, micro-memoir reflection).
“Well the key lesson I’ve learned is that rhetorical skills can be applied to almost every aspect of life. I believe it will make me a better reader and writer and become a more subjective while at the same time critical audience of the world” (survey).

“I am constantly analyzing things on tv and on the street that I come across. Also, it has changed the way I write because I am much more aware of my target audience as well as my word choice” (survey).

“I can’t go anywhere or read anything without looking for the author's rhetorical moves and strategies” (survey).

Again, the element of surprise seems to have worked to enhance students’ learning. The process of reading and composing graphic memoir demanded attention to visual and verbal design, temporal progression, and textual construction that transcend media and genre. This attention to the unseen or unspoken elements in comics composition encouraged students to look for what’s happening in the gutter of other texts. Students’ comments provide support for the potential of alternative methods and modes to foster transferable multiliteracies and sharpen their rhetorical lenses. Moreover, the care with which students negotiated their audience roles contributed to a heightened awareness of their behaviors as audiences, which in turn made them more careful authors. This dialogism was enhanced by, but not confined to, the personal stakes of graphic memoir.

8.2 Some Constraints: Gaps in Literacy and Resistance to Audiences

For all these claims of literacy development and rhetorical facility, students’ work in this class was somewhat lacking in two areas of concern to composition studies and this project. First, although students enjoyed their experiences discussing and creating graphic memoirs, their analytic essays demonstrated some marked weaknesses of organization and evidence. By contrast, the proposals for and reflections on their own
work tended to demonstrate greater clarity of voice and purpose. In part, I attribute these differences to time and emphasis: because only one of the major assignments was a conventional essay, students did not have the opportunity, or perhaps the motivation, to focus and refine their academic moves. That being said, the constant revision of their graphic memoirs did prompt reconsiderations of previous assignments: “I find working on my revisions to be a lot more fun and interesting than studying for calculus or accounting. I am really enjoying going back through my first two compositions and working on them” (B.M., blog, 6/6). On the whole, however, students apparently felt more confident writing about their own rhetorical choices than about others’, and that assurance came across in their analytic reflections.

Nevertheless, this confident assertion of rhetorical design did not mean students were comfortable sharing their final products. This was the only one of the three courses documented in this dissertation in which students did not present their final projects to the class; they voted near-unanimously against it. In the final survey, I asked whether they would share their graphic memoirs and with whom. Responses were rather evenly divided between those who couldn’t wait to show off and those who had no intention of exposing their memoirs to audience’s eyes. Several students noted that they didn’t feel like the products were successful, polished, or purposeful enough to merit circulation. For others, the issue was that the subject was either too personal or not pertinent for general audiences. In part, this reticence might be connected to a lack of awareness for outlets for such personal/public compositions, a topic I will continue to engage in subsequent chapters. But more to the point, students’ persistent associations of memoir with memory and self-discovery meant that most designed their compositions for private audiences—
themselves and/or their inner circles—and were unwilling to expand those audiences. I respected that choice as organic to the topics students chose to engage, but their prioritization of privacy suggests the value of more directed autobiographical explorations like the literacy narratives engaged in Chapter 4. In terms of encouraging students’ public engagement, then, the memoir genre may not be particularly effective. Indeed, emphasizing the rhetoricity of memoir seemed to reinforce some students’ tendency to fall back on simplistic morals that undermined the richness of their experiences as authors and individuals. But that evaluation is mine, based on my own concern with public rhetoric that will be discussed further in the conclusion to Chapter 4. Here, though, I conclude by attending to students’ own learning priorities—their positive reception to multimodal narratives, their desire for multiliteracies that extend beyond the classroom—and by acknowledging that this course’s mixed results are illustrative of the complex, sometimes competing goals of composition students and teachers.
CHAPTER 3: Documenting Lives: Autobiographical Documentary and Ethics

1.1 Introduction

In this case study, students examined and created video autobiographical documentaries. As in “Illustrating Lives,” the course was designed to engage students in the rhetorical design of self-representation in multiple modes but with two key differences: the video form and a hybrid genre. Whereas comics hadn’t been on most radars, video pervades the daily lives of many contemporary college students. Their familiarity with and immersion in the video form can lead to heightened critical skills and motivation to create a quality product. On the other hand, students here negotiated a less common narrative genre, or rather the interaction of two genres: autobiography and documentary. By connecting a genre they associated with subjective notions of truth (autobiography) to one they assumed to be all about objective reality (documentary), this class problematized both of those concepts, resulting in critical negotiations of the rhetorical nature of nonfiction representation and the resulting demands placed on authors and audiences to ensure ethical, effective communication. Students’ video compositions demonstrate their analytic and creative approaches to video storytelling and reflect students’ attendant revision of communication as a conversational act and persuasion as a factor of mutual participation. Such findings indicate the pedagogical value of
incorporating this hybrid narrative genre in composition courses in order to promote a particularly humane brand of rhetorical literacy, a topic addressed in the concluding discussion. At the same time, students’ predominant conceptualizations of audience as fellow students, friends, and family point to their assessment of the rhetorical reach of personal narratives as more than private but less than public. This chapter therefore serves as a bridge from the self-focused memoir discussed in Chapter 2 to the public-oriented experiments in Chapter 4 while serving as a focal point for considering the high stakes of representing the self and/with/to others.

1.2 Chapter Overview

I have organized this chapter like the previous: In the next section, I situate this research within calls for composition teachers to take advantage of video composing in the classroom as well as the digital storytelling movement that tends to emphasize expressivist goals over rhetorical considerations. As a response to these threads, I suggest that the burgeoning genre of autobiographical documentary offers an opportunity to foster students’ multiliteracies while reframing personal narrative as rhetorical composition with the potential for public influence. Following this contextualization, I offer an overview of the Course Design before launching into its narrative. In section 4, Situated Practice, I report on students’ previous experiences with autobiography and personal narrative assignments, as well as their beliefs about the genres of autobiography and documentary as evident in preliminary surveys and early discussions, which served as a starting point for my instruction and their subsequent learning. Section 5 briefly comments on certain emphases in my Overt Instruction, the definitions and course readings that scaffolded students’ construction of their critical frame.
The *Critical Framing* section presents findings from my inductive analysis of the course data, from which I extrapolate the three central themes—*genre and epistemology*, *rights and responsibilities*, and *rhetoric and identification*—students negotiated as they examined the hybrid genre of autobiographical documentary in theory and practice. I suggest that these explorations resulted in reading practices that acknowledged the situated perspectives of authors and audiences (and their rhetorical implications) and the attendant ethical dynamics of communication. From this foundation arose students’ design of autobiographical documentaries that reflect their critical assessment and deployment of the rhetorical resources of digital video. Section 7, *Transformed Practice*, offers extended discussions of three students’ final autobiographical documentaries. Selected for their representative value, these texts reflect some of the key strategies students employed to build identification with, and thereby to influence, their audiences. In the *Conclusion*, I synthesize some of the central findings that emerge from these students’ narratives and the course as a whole, focusing in particular on the potential contributions of narrative rhetoric for a pedagogy devoted to fostering conscientious listening, critical thinking, and productive multiliteracies.

2. Contextualization

2.1 Video in Composition Pedagogy

The value of video in the multimodal composition classroom is a subject of considerable interest. In students’ digital ecologies, video is the dominant multimedia: “cinema is now becoming the cultural interface, a toolbox for all cultural communication, overtaking the printed word” (Manovich, 2001, p. 86). Students have grown up watching movies, from big-budget mainstream productions to shaky amateur footage on YouTube.
In many ways, therefore, video can be seen as one of students’ home media, an area of critical strength and genuine interest (Meeks & Ilyasova, 2003). It offers valuable exercises in dialogical design when students are asked to translate their critical acumen into creative practice. By incorporating multiple semiotic modes and an array of media, video offers extensive resources for rhetorical designs. The value of video composition for multiliteracy learning has become apparent, demanding further research into how to best realize its potential: “Although we don’t know all the answers to the questions these new media raise, we recognize that digital video has the qualities we are looking for to engage students in combining design, production, and literc(ies) in the classroom” (Meeks & Ilyasova, 2003). The limited availability and high cost of digital resources may have thus far prevented the wide spread of video composing assignments, but these access issues are being remedied by less expensive equipment and the video recording capabilities available through personal tools like cell phones. As researchers and teachers continue to explore multimodal design and digital distribution, video stands poised to become a cornerstone of a multiliteracies pedagogy.

2.2 Digital Storytelling in Public and Academic Settings

Video composition, at least of the autobiographical variety, is a rare subject on which there seems to exist a larger body of work about production than reception. Despite the recent prominence of overtly subjective documentaries, few scholars in narrative or film studies have addressed the increasing convergence of autobiography and documentary (Bruss, 1980; Lane, 2002; Renov, 2004). Meanwhile, however, the rise of Web 2.0 and user-generated content has inspired waves of independent, often autobiographical, videographers to release their video compositions to broader publics. In
addition to the usual social commons like YouTube, workshops, festivals, and contests promote multimedia exchange through what’s often referred to as ‘digital storytelling.’ From grassroots community projects to mainstream media events, digital storytelling is a thriving genre, receiving a good deal of attention in public and educational discourses.

Leading the way is the Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS), an international nonprofit organization “dedicated to assisting people in using digital media to tell meaningful stories from their lives. Our focus is on partnering with community, educational, and business institutions to develop large-scale initiatives using methods and principles from our original Digital Storytelling Workshop” (2011). Through the CDS movement, digital stories have become a recognizable genre, a kind of autobiographical documentary: “a short, first person video-narrative created by combining recorded voice, still and moving images, and music or other sounds” (CDS, 2011); a “3-5 minute video produced by someone who is not a media professional, typically constructed as a thought piece on a personal experience that is important to the author” (Matthews-DeNatale, 2008, p. 4). These definitions place particular emphasis on personal expression and creativity. The digital storytelling movement is premised upon the idea that telling one’s story is an empowering, even liberatory act of self-expression; equipment and training are often offered to marginalized groups as a way to promote agency and dialogue. In this light, digital storytelling has been praised as democratic for its accessibility, flexibility, and mobility (Meadows, 2011; EDUCAUSE, 2007; Ohler, 2008). As a genre, the digital story is grounded in the value of sharing stories—offering one’s stories to others and listening in turn:

Sharing stories can lead to positive change. The process of supporting groups of
people in making media is just the first step. Personal narratives in digital media format can touch viewers deeply, moving them to reflect on their own experiences, modify their behavior, treat others with greater compassion, speak out about injustice, and become involved in civic and political life. Whether online, in local communities, or at the institutional/policy level, the sharing of stories has the power to make a real difference. (CDS, 2011)

The CDS furthers this potential through its connections to social advocacy projects. Digital storytelling has been used in local and international settings to encourage understanding and dialogue about issues including healthcare, immigration, violence, race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, and environmental sustainability.51

In spite of these rhetorical agendas, the digital storytelling movement is dominated by expressivist language and goals that undermine or overwhelm rhetorical considerations. That is, even while discussing others’ responses, the CDS model assumes that the real target of a digital story is the author him/herself. The Digital Storytelling Cookbook, for example, encourages tellers to share their stories to influence others or “to teach a moral or lesson,” but then argues that the ultimate goal of receiving audience response is to “help the teller find a deeper meaning in their own story… and move on” (Lambert, 2010, p. 10). The purpose of these narratives, according to this model, is personal therapy rather than rhetorical self-presentation. Discussions tend to reinforce essentialist notions of identity and authentic voice based on inherent storytelling abilities52: “Storyteller’s [sic] sense of individuality and ownership is enhanced when

51 For an extensive list of digital storytelling projects in diverse settings, see Matthews-DeNatale (2008).
52 Hull & Katz (2006) provide an exception to this static, essential view of identity in favor of performativity and multiplicity—“an agentive self” capable of engaging in public discourses (p. 48). Their case studies and discussion, however, remain focused on the value of digital storytelling as a process of self-reflection.
they are allowed to tell their own story in their own voice” (Shewbridge, 2007, n.p.). This emphasis on the individual dictates that the digital story remains writer-centered, not audience-oriented. It also downplays the ethical considerations that attend representing the self and others.

These priorities have repercussions when digital storytelling is taken up in education, where it has been enthusiastically embraced for its potential contributions to multiliteracy learning at the primary and secondary level (Banaszewski, 2002; Ohler, 2008; Robin, 2011) and higher-education humanities (Benmayor, 2008; Gravestock & Jenkins, 2009; Hartley & McMillan, 2009; Miley, 2009). Most proponents draw directly from the CDS model, offering advice and rubrics according to its terminology (Barratt, 2005; Robin & Pierson, 2005; Yuksel, Robin, & McNeil, 2011). Such assignments emphasize personal expression and define an “organic and natural” style in opposition to the analytical, official voice “of our expository writing class, our essays and term papers… We have been taught that this voice carries dispassionate authority, useful perhaps in avoiding misunderstandings, but absolutely deadly as a story” (Lambert, 2010, p. 3). This polarization of emotion and logic, identity and authority, reinforces conventional arguments about personal narrative assignments: they foster self-reflection, intercultural learning, and empowerment, and they promote reflective learning and enhanced student engagement—but they are neither academic nor argumentative. As a result, digital storytelling is quickly becoming a valued pedagogical tool, but it may also be missing out on the opportunities afforded by a more rhetorical approach to video composition.

53 Digital storytelling has been adopted beyond the humanities, as well, in medicine, science, and the social sciences (e.g., Sandars, 2009; Yuksel, Robin, & McNeil, 2011)
2.3 Autobiographical Documentary in Composition Pedagogy

The calls for attention to video composing in composition studies rely on broad claims about the medium; my response suggests that a specifically autobiographical approach to video composition can yoke students’ literacy learning to rhetorical questions of genre, audience, and resources and ethical questions of relationships and representation. Such a combination promises to harness the emotional, expressivist potential of digital storytelling to the rhetorical priorities of composition. To date, although video composing has been praised for its potential, compositionists seem relatively cautious about engaging the digital storytelling movement as such. The phrase appears occasionally within broader discussions of multimodal pedagogies (Anderson, Atkins, Ball, Millar, Selfe, & Selfe, 2006; Clark, 2009), writing program administration (Howard, 2003; Kopp & Stevens, 2010), and writing across the curriculum (Hocks, 2001). It’s notable, and perhaps telling, that most discussions of digital storytelling focus on its uses outside of traditional academic settings in local community settings (e.g., Salpeter, 2005; Meadows, 2006; Beeson & Miskelly, n.d.). In the context of college composition and rhetoric courses, digital storytelling, like narrative itself, might be considered not rigorous or critical enough—and given its expressivist treatment, there would be some validity to those concerns. But I’d like to argue that by translating digital storytelling into rhetorical narrative, composition can direct its emotional energy toward critical consciousness. This chapter suggests that framing students’ video compositions as autobiographical documentaries, rather than digital storytelling, can move them beyond a self-centered understanding of personal expression toward a nuanced engagement with rhetoric, representation, and ethics.
3. Course Design

This course was developed for precisely such narrative explorations: “Documenting Lives” arose out of a cluster of courses on media and representation at The Ohio State University, one of which, offered through the English department, focused on documentary. As a ten-week second required composition class, it prioritized analytic writing; the documentary sections split their time between traditional and computer classrooms and substituted a digital video composition for one writing assignment. The version I designed for this research project focused on the hybrid genre of autobiographical documentaries, defined loosely as those documentaries created about or through the author-director’s life experiences. Formal assignments included two written essays and one multimedia composition, as well as regular contributions to the course blog. (For the complete syllabus, please see Appendix A.)

The assignment sequence began with scholarly readings and academic writing about the independent genres of documentary and autobiography while students examined hybrid examples. Interspersed with documentary-specific readings were others that explored narrative from a variety of disciplinary perspectives: rhetoric (Herrick, 2003), psychology (Bruner, 2001), and literature (Smith & Watson, 2001). These interdisciplinary perspectives informed students’ first writing assignment, an exploratory essay on the implications of combining autobiography and documentary. Using the narrative communication model and certain key concepts from documentary studies, the

54 The documentary course was developed by Scott Lloyd Dewitt and Cynthia Selfe in cooperation with the Digital Media Project. Although the official cluster has since become obsolete, the course continues to flourish, enjoying popularity and positive evaluations from students and instructors for its ability to foster wide-ranging rhetorical literacies in general, and to do so while addressing the central concerns of contemporary documentary studies: the rhetoric and ethics of representing reality.
class conducted collective analyses of three very different primary texts: Michael Moore’s *Roger & Me* (1989), Jonathan Caouette’s *Tarnation* (2003), and Ari Folman’s *Waltz with Bashir* (2008). The second assignment asked students to conduct an extensive rhetorical analysis on another documentary of their choosing (from a provided list) and present their findings as a thesis-driven academic essay. The final assignment asked students to apply the theoretical and practical insights of the first two assignments to their own documentary productions. The project included a formal proposal about the video’s audiences, rhetorical goals, and narrative strategies and an early draft for workshopping. Students composed their autobiographical documentaries on Mac’s iMovie software, incorporating images, audio, and video footage that they borrowed, adapted, or created themselves, and they wrote analytic reflections about the process and product. Finally, students screened their video compositions for each other and awarded prizes for best picture, best story, and best telling. In the *Critical Framing* section, I lay out the conversations that shaped and resulted from these assignments; in *Transformed Practice* I analyze the award-winning videos to illustrate students’ negotiation of the narrative occasion(s) of this class community and their own local audiences. Students’ compositions attest to the emotional power of autobiographical documentaries but also to their rhetorical potential for connecting with and influencing audiences. Before considering where students concluded, I turn next to where they started.

4. Situated Practice

The class members of “Documenting Lives” arrived with different backgrounds and priorities, but they shared certain beliefs that shaped the direction of our conversations. As in “Illustrating Lives,” students enrolled in the required second-year
writing course without any knowledge of its theme or digital components. They had each taken the first-year writing course (or its equivalent transfer) and so had at least a basic understanding of rhetoric. On the first day of class, I asked the class to perform an impromptu collective analysis of the introduction to Morgan Spurlock’s *Super Size Me* (2004). This exercise demonstrated students’ rhetorical savvy with video, a medium with which they have a great deal of familiarity. Students astutely noted the critical importance of enlisting audience identification, the role of music in establishing tone and guiding response, the value of humor, and the complicated questions that arise when including other people in one’s own story—all hallmark issues for the course as a whole. From this first day, then, students established a degree of confidence in their critical skills.

Upon learning that they were going to compose their own autobiographical documentaries, however, they were understandably wary. In previous versions of this course, many students dropped after the first day. I had learned to repeatedly reassure students that they did not need to have prior experience or expertise, that other students had survived and enjoyed the course, and that “it will be okay.” Only one or two students dropped this class, and the ones who remained made clear their anxieties about the project. Their concerns were two-fold: one, that their own lives were not interesting enough, and two, that their technological skills were not developed enough. Such an underestimation of their own digital literacies is common among students, as is this tendency to doubt the tellability of their stories. Given their engrained notions of autobiography, as revealed in the preliminary survey discussed below, students’ feelings of inadequacy in terms of content become understandable.
4.1 Autobiography & Personal Narratives

The preliminary survey\textsuperscript{55} suggested that students’ past educational experiences had shaped their current perspectives on autobiography and personal writing assignments. Students on the whole identified a distinction between their own life writings and those that earn the elevated classification of autobiography. One response is particularly telling: “When I hear ‘autobiography’ I think of presidents and other important people. When I hear ‘personal narrative’ I think of the essay portions of standardized tests” (survey). Others echoed this distinction. One student highlighted the difference in status and, consequently, audience interest: “For autobiography or memoir, I think of famous people of a really interesting life story. For personal narrative, I think of more the everyday person and a typical situation” (survey). Another student concurred, placing strong emphasis on the stature of the subject: “When I hear ‘autobiography’ I suppose I tend to think about words like history, importance, or even chance. I like to think that people who make autobiographies are of extreme importance; people who changed the world. When I hear ‘personal narrative’ I think more about personal storytelling” (survey). For both categories, students often used words like “truth” and “reflection”; many also applied the words “long” and “boring” to autobiographies proper (survey).

Autobiography elicited associations of fame, age, and importance, whereas personal narratives were deemed, well, personal—the genre of the commoner, the amateur. Such associations may help explain why many students felt intimidated and unqualified to compose autobiographically despite their extensive background writing personal narratives. These discrepancies appear traceable, at least in part, to the use of ‘personal

\textsuperscript{55} See Appendix B.
narrative’ as a label for students’ own writings, a label that is noticeably absent in literary studies or mainstream publishing.

These distinctions may be traced to students’ prior experiences in educational settings, where they recalled a fair amount of assigned life writing: usually required journals or personal statements for applications. These genres appear markedly different in terms of rhetorical situation, except in that both are being read and evaluated by some external authority. But those standards, and the strategies that would meet them, remained mysterious. Whereas some students indicated that these assignments validated their “voice” and their experiences as evidence, more recalled either meaningless or negative experiences: “They were evaluated by my grammar and my ability to follow the directions”; “These assignments have made autobiographical writing my least favorite type of writing” (survey). These immediate, instinctive responses draw our attention to the stakes of our terminological choices, which indelibly mark students’ sense of their own work in relation to writing that matters in the world. Given its limited sample (and potentially leading questions), I hesitate to extrapolate fully from this survey, but the relationship between student experiences and their appreciation (or lack thereof) of the rhetorical nature of narrative is worth considering. When narrative writing assignments are, or are interpreted as, low stakes exercises in conforming to teachers’ idiosyncrasies, we cannot be surprised when students undervalue the results and, consequently, underestimate their rhetorical potential. These attitudes undermine even the assumed benefits—self-reflection and authorization—that motivate teachers to assign personal writing in the first place, leaving students disengaged, often deliberately, from the high stakes of self-representation.
4.2 Documentary

In an interesting parallel, students’ previous experiences with documentary had resulted in a reductive definition and general distaste for the genre. (Although I did not ask specifically about documentary in the initial survey, remarks in class discussions, on the course blog, and in their essays confirmed my hunches based on previous classes.) In general, students claimed a remarkable lack of exposure to documentary film. One student confessed his immediate association of documentary with “a device high school teachers put in the VCR when they want a day off” (I.J., genre essay). Several others confirmed this memory, even going so far as to say that such films were the only documentaries they had seen: “Originally, I only believed what Grierson described as ‘lecture documentaries,’ to be viable sources of information. These ‘lecture documentaries,’ contained black & white pictures and clips and an ‘all knowing’ narrator” (M.B, blog, 10/10). In students’ memories, the subjects covered were scientific or historical, and the style was monotonous. One explained, “I had no idea that documentaries can be more than a boring description” (Z.K., genre essay) and others concurred that they assumed documentaries were “basically kind of boring movies that just try to explain facts and information about a particular topic or event” (F.J., blog, 11/1).

Students’ situated views of autobiography and documentary, and the resulting beliefs about their own lives and writing, were remarkably similar, even considering commonalities of region and education level. The assumption that only exceptional individuals merit autobiography suggests a lack of exposure or attention to the publishing boom in life narratives. Whereas students in Chapter 2 recognized (even if they did not
participate in) the popularity of memoirs by seemingly average folk, the word ‘autobiography’ prompted much narrower associations that precluded mundane personal narratives. Likewise, the limited definition of documentary indicates that students are not necessarily drawing connections between the user-generated videos they regularly consume and critique and the mainstream film industry. By asking students to revise their vocabularies, this course helped them bridge those gaps between high and low, important and inconsequential. Early laments that their lives were not interesting enough for—not worthy of—autobiographical treatments faded as course readings and conversations challenged these assumptions about genre, audience, and purpose. This revision enabled students to validate their personal experiences and consider their possible relevance to other audiences.

5. Overt Instruction

One of my first goals in this class was to challenge some of these assumptions, to ask students to question their preexisting beliefs about autobiography, documentary, and themselves as authors. My overt instruction in the first few weeks therefore focused on two related threads: redefining terms and delineating tools. I assigned readings from the field of documentary studies (Nichols, 2001; Ward, 2005) and autobiography studies (Smith & Watson, 2001; Bruner, 2001) that demonstrate the slippery nature of generic definitions even/especially among experts. We discussed these complexities in class and devoted the first major essay to the reconsideration of both autobiography and documentary that resulted from placing them in dialogue. Alongside these theoretical concerns I offered the practical toolkit of the narrative communication model to help students sharpen their analytic skills on our primary texts.
5.1 Narrative Communication Model

On the second day of class, before screening any movies, I presented students with the narrative communication model that would scaffold our subsequent investigations. Although I had previously explained that our focus would be on the genre(s) of autobiographical documentary, our first class discussion was about narrative in general, before moving to autobiography in particular. For this session, students read James Herrick’s (2003) “Narration and Argument,” which offers an accessible overview of the “persuasive power of stories” (p. 10). Herrick’s claims focus on what narrative can do—like bring arguments to life and foster connection to the audience—without much discussion of how. For that, I offered the narrative toolkit and surrounding communication model (see figure 3.1).

![Figure 3.1: Narrative communication model](image-url)
This introduction provided students with a vocabulary that would help them identify the strategic choices made by storytellers in general and, as we turned to the texts at hand, by documentarians in particular.

**5.2 Genres & Definitions**

Because students’ initial survey responses and comments in class indicated a lack of familiarity with the genres of autobiography and documentary, early reading assignments and class discussions focused on establishing working definitions and identifying common conventions. I offered a basic definition of genre as the categorization of texts according to authors’ and audiences’ shared conventions and expectations—and then asked students to identify those conventions in each genre. Their difficulty doing so was an instructive exercise in the slippery nature of generic distinctions: Are all autobiographies written in alphabetic text and printed on paper? Are they all related in the first person and in the past tense? Do documentaries necessarily have to be movies? Must they all employ talking heads and/or disembodied voiceover? Each attempt to pin down these answers was complicated with exceptions from our primary texts and students’ extracurricular knowledge. As a result, students were receptive to, if occasionally frustrated by, the experts’ refusal to offer clear definitions: “After reading the Ward article, I felt that I had gained a better sense of knowledge about documentary film, but I still feel somewhat lost... Does anyone else feel that this concept of what is correct and incorrect is difficult to understand??” (S.M., blog, 10/11). Their assumptions about what counts as either autobiography or documentary were productively complicated by the hybridization of the two, which drew attention to the social construction of genres and everyday users’ own role in their ongoing design. Such
considerations prompted students’ subsequent critical framing of autobiographical documentaries as public acts.

5.2.1. Revising and Expanding Autobiography

The assigned readings challenged students’ conventional understanding of autobiography as a whole-life retrospective by an important public figure. Bruner’s (2001) definition requires only the alignment of narrator and protagonist: “A narrator, in the here and now, takes upon himself or herself the task of describing the progress of a protagonist in the there and then, one who happens to share his name” (p. 27). The ambiguity Bruner establishes here caused students to attend to the multiple selves present in any self-representation. Moreover, he then proceeds to complicate the issue of time by pointing out that “autobiography is not only about the past, but is busily about the present as well” (p. 29). In our discussion of this reading, I encouraged students to explore the possibilities that open up when we consider autobiography in this light, as simply a story told by and about the self. Perhaps even more influential was the fact that we were studying not autobiography as a noun, but autobiographical as an adjective. Positioning autobiographical as modifier for the genre of documentary helped shift the terms of the conversation away from representing a whole life towards representing one’s subjective experience. Our working definition of autobiography, therefore, was deliberately broad, allowing the inclusion of slice-of-life narratives as well as social experimentation. The primary texts we examined together in class, as well as the options available for their individual rhetorical analyses, were selected to cover a range of autobiographical approaches and offer a variety of options for students’ own compositions.
5.2.2 Revising and Expanding Documentary

Meanwhile, attaching the autobiographical label to documentary troubled most students’ knee-jerk associations of that genre with ideals of objective truth. In my opening salvoes, I offered John Grierson’s famous (and possibly apocryphal) “creative interpretation of actuality,” a phrase that clarifies that documentary only ever offers partial representation of reality (Corner, 1996, p. 13). During the first two weeks of class, students read articles by documentary scholars Bill Nichols (2001) and Paul Ward (2005) that further complicated their assumptions and focused their attention. Ward’s expansive treatment of the genre highlighted its mutability: “The only unchanging thing about documentary is that it is a form that makes assertions or truth claims about the real world or real people in that world (including the real world of history); how it does this is something that is subject to change” (2005, p. 8). With even experts unable or unwilling to impose boundaries, students were forced to acknowledge the impossibility of easy answers to complex questions. Nevertheless, as Nichols pointed out, this slipperiness means that ethics must be factored into any practical definition: “Ethics exist to govern the conduct of groups regarding matters for which hard and fast rules, or laws, will not suffice… Ethics becomes a measure of the ways in which negotiations about the nature of the relationship between filmmaker and subjects have consequences for subjects and viewers alike” (2001, p. 9). In their essays about genre, which I draw upon in the next section, students recognized the centrality of relationships for defining documentaries and delineating ethical guidelines, eradicating any hope for neat rules just in time to begin experimenting with their own standards and values.
6. Critical Framing

These supplied concepts scaffolded students’ examinations of genre in general and of particular primary texts, from which I have distilled the critical frame outlined in this section. Building upon our conversations and course readings, the first major writing assignment was a “genre(s) analysis” that asked student to explore the sub/hybrid genre that resulted from a collision between autobiography and documentary. The stated goal of this assignment was “to explore—and work towards your own definition of—the genres of autobiography and documentary in preparation for your later assignments (a rhetorical analysis and your own rhetorical production)” (syllabus). These questions of generic definitions, conventions, and innovations would serve as a shifting frame for collective and individual analyses. As a class, we watched Michael Moore’s Roger & Me (1989), Jonathan Caouette’s Tarnation (2003), and Ari Folman’s Waltz with Bashir (2008), subjecting each to rigorous rhetorical and ethical criticism. Students also selected from a provided list of autobiographical documentaries for their rhetorical analysis essays. In this section I offer an analysis of students’ major findings as demonstrated in these assignments, synthesizing the broad themes they identified as arising from the confluence of autobiography and documentary. I have organized these issues into the following critical frame: genre and epistemology, rights and responsibilities, and rhetoric and identification. Within each section, I draw upon students’ formal and informal

56 These primary texts were Tracy Tragos’ Be Good, Smile Pretty (2003), Doug Block’s 51 Birch Street (2005), Michael Franti’s I Know I’m Not Alone (2006), and Alan Berliner’s Wide Awake (2006); upon request, I added the more readily available options of Spurlock’s (2004) Supersize Me, Zana Briski’s (2004) Born into Brothels, and James Marsh’s Man on Wire (2008). (This last one was included with an asterisk because although it was based on Phillipe Petit’s autobiography, he was not the director. I asked students to attend to that distinction in their analyses.) The list of offerings also included Ross McElwee’s Sherman’s March (1986), Marlon Riggs’ Tongues Untied (1990), Peter Friedman and Tom Joslin’s Silverlake Life (1993), and Nathanial Kahn’s My Architect (2003), but no students selected any of these.
discussions of these issues (in class, on the blog, and in essays), illustrating their evolving theoretical insights with practical examples from their analyses of primary texts. These macro and micro concerns establish the foundation upon which students moved towards a transformed practice of autobiographical documentary.

6.1 Genre & Epistemology: Complicating Reality through Representation

As the title of this section suggests, and students came to realize, studying autobiographical documentary means swimming in some pretty deep waters. Prompted by my instruction, course readings, and their own collective and individual analyses, students confronted the big epistemological challenges: How do we know what we know? What’s the relationship among knowledge, experience, and reality? Their explorations of these questions over the course of the term pursued two related strands: objectivity may be impossible and subjectivity may be unavoidable. This is not to suggest that students’ responses to the challenges of representing (some form of) reality were unified or simple, nor that these philosophical debates weren’t unsettling—but they required a level of active negotiation that set the tone for the course.

6.1.2 The Myth of Objectivity

Students used their own situated practice as evidence of the attitudes of a broader audience who, like them, defined documentary according to their experience with old-school “lecture films” with “old black and white clips, pictures, and other silhouettes, in which an omniscient narrator recites a story off set” (M.B., genre essay). More to the point, audiences assume that these conventions guarantee an objective representation of reality, the supposed goal of documentary: “[A] common misconception with documentaries is that they must all be completely truthful, in the sense that everything
portrayed in the film happened exactly as it is shown and exactly when it is said to have happened” (M.K., genre essay). Students regularly cited Ward (2005) in noting that such connotations have “had a debilitating effect on understanding documentaries” (p. 6). As they came to see, these beliefs determine audiences’ varying responses to the genre: “Those who define documentary as nothing but the truth will believe everything they see and hear, and others will make sure any information they receive they analyze from a more cautious perspective” (C.D., genre essay). Such an acknowledgement requires, for some audiences, an epistemological adjustment: “There is no one genre that will ever completely and truly depict reality, as it exists only in concept” (R.Z., genre essay). If autobiography and documentary, genres of so-called reality, are inherently subjective, a rigid concept of reality places blinders on audiences’ critical perspective.

6.1.2 The Inevitability of Subjectivity

Although students were initially discomfited by the newly-discovered rhetoricity of documentaries, the impossibility of filmmaking without a personal perspective soon became apparent: “[A]lthough something can appear to be unbiased, the producer still arranged and edited the film, and everyone has some sort of background and history that is going to influence how they produce a film” (C.D., genre essay). By extension, a revelation noted by multiple students and generally agreed upon in class discussions and on the blog was that “every documentary film is also an autobiography” (K.D., genre essay): “Whether we are filmmakers or audience members, as humans, we cannot view any person or situation objectively. As soon as raw reality enters our head, it becomes illuminated with our own preconceived notion and the tinge of our own experiences”
(C.E., genre essay). Even when/if directors aim for impartiality, it is impossible because “[t]he world doesn’t look the same through a camera as it does through the eyes of a casual observer” (P.A., genre essay). Just as documentarians’ cameras can only offer partial representations of complex realities, autobiographers’ self-representations are both inevitably partial and necessarily limited by the vagaries of memory, “which as we all know, is never completely vivid and bold in our minds” (K.D., blog, 11/7). This insight was aided by students’ readings of documentaries that flouted all conventions of realism and somehow thereby achieved a reasonable approximation of the authors’ realities. Although most students found Tarnation to be an uncomfortable viewing experience, they (sometimes begrudgingly) recognized the value of Caouette’s style “in order to portray the sense of confusion and discomfort that was created by ‘dispersonalization [sic] disorder,’ in which he suffered” (M.B., blog, 10/24). Similarly, Waltz with Bashir “was really confusing and hard to follow… after I thought about it I realized that the producer most likely did this on purpose to show the audience how the soldiers felt. I'm sure they were confused as well during all this, and probably didn't know what they were doing either” (C.D., blog, 11/7). In this way, analysis of particular primary texts became a route to complicating generalized genre definitions. With objective reality and subjective representation no longer positioned as either/or, autobiographical documentary came to be seen as “something more powerful than either an autobiography or a documentary could be without elements from the other” (V.D., genre essay). This power brought to the fore attendant responsibilities.

57 This awareness rivals Paul De Man’s argument that autobiography is a relationship, an approach to reading, rather than a genre: “any book with a read-able title page is, to some extent, autobiographical” (1979, p. 922). It also echoes a key premise of expressivist writing, that all writing is autobiographical (Murray, 1991), but with a distinctly rhetorical bent.
6.2 Rights & Responsibilities: The Ethical Exchange

In light of these conversations about the subjective nature of representation and the inevitability of rhetoric, students were deeply concerned with the ethical issues of autobiographical documentaries. These questions became rather more personal as students examined their own roles as audience members and their impending authorship.

6.2.1 Authorial Rights and Responsibilities

From the start, many students focused on the rights of the author as artist because “a documentary is a work of art as much as it is a nonfiction piece” (R.A., blog, 10/9). This privilege was enhanced by the autobiographical element, where students argued the author rightfully, if within reason, gets to define the stakes and methods of telling their own stories. Beyond that, students’ growing acceptance of subjective representation mean that “as long as the producer is portraying their information in the way that they understand it (within reason), all editing should be allowed”—but “you cannot outright lie in a documentary” (R.A., blog, 10/9). Moreover, “[a]rtistic license should not operate as a blanket justification for exploitative decisions made throughout the filmmaking process” (A.L., genre essay). Students roundly condemned deliberate deception, like Moore’s trickery of certain subjects and failure to report the interviews he was granted with Roger Smith, as a violation of subjects’ and audiences’ rights. Ethical handling of subjects becomes a matter of responsibility as well as credibility: As Tarnation and Roger & Me highlighted, sometimes informed consent is only the bare minimum; several students suggested that perhaps “there should be a written consent form that explains the

58 About a week after we began discussing Roger & Me (1989), I showed some clips from Caine and Melnyk’s (2007) Manufacturing Dissent, a documentary that turns Moore’s method on himself and reveals some manipulations and misrepresentations. Students’ outrage at having been deceived contributed to our ongoing conversations about the limits of authorial rights and the risks of uncritical viewing.
producer’s intentions of how the subjects are going to be portrayed” (S.M., blog, 10/10). Others determined a possible solution, which many of them employed, of screening the film to allow “subjects to view how they were being portrayed before giving consent to a larger viewing audience” (R.Z., blog, 10/11). But even honesty is not foolproof, as Tarnation demonstrated. In representing his troubled family, Caouette exposed them in a way that made students uncomfortable. This tension resisted easy answers: “So do you tell the story? Or pretend that life is all butterflies?” (R.A., blog, 10/23). These questions raised the stakes of ethical handling of not just the subjects who expect fair treatment but also of audiences who expect some degree of authenticity.

Authors’ responsibilities to audiences were deemed of greater importance because of their wide reach and the potential public consequences of deceit. Some students suggested that a loss of credibility due to unethical choices “not only affects the producers, but fellow filmmakers of that genre” (R.A., genre essay). For others, this was a personal matter: having just realized that documentarians frequently take liberties with reality in favor of representation, these students were concerned for others who may fall victim to their own assumptions and/or deceptive strategies. “[A]udiences who perceive documentaries the wrong way can be taken advantage of” by liberal editing practices (C.D., genre essay). One student asked, “Is it unethical that these people, ignorant of rhetoric, be influenced by a film, since it is indeed easier to lead such an individual to a specific conclusion or belief? Using rhetoric strategy on the ignorant is not an unethical act of a filmmaker unless his intent is unethical” (D.J., genre essay). These debates highlighted the helpful distinction between the ethics of the told and the ethics of the telling, that is, between the issues raised by the story and those raised by the act of telling.
that story (Phelan, 2010). For example, Moore’s told—drawing attention to serious social and economic problems—seemed ethical, but the way he mocked his subjects and presented false information to the audience was clearly not. The consequence, several students noted, was that the problematic telling overwhelmed the admirable told: “I think his intentions are in the right place, I'm just not so sure about his methods for revealing those intentions” (R.Z., blog, 10/11). This tension prompted conversations about the relationship between rhetorical ends and means as well as of the role played by audience judgments.

6.2.2 Audience Rights and Responsibilities

As students’ new perspectives on the genre of documentary demonstrated, audiences play a significant role in meaning-making and therefore have their own ethical obligations. An audience’s right to objective truth was quickly complicated, but they might still reasonably expect a degree of transparency. Nevertheless, students acknowledged, responsibility must be shared: Documentarians shouldn’t take advantage of such audiences, but neither should audiences rely blindly on fallible or unreliable authors: “The audience chooses whether they want to watch it and believe what is being presented. A producer should be able to portray things however they want. The viewer should not be naïve enough to believe everything they see” (C.D., blog, 10/9). More than one suggested audiences needed to remain on guard, even to the point of outside research on the subject at hand: “To extract total truth from a documentary, it seems a viewer must be willing to do some background research. Knowing more of the story are just might help stop you from being manipulated” (F.J., genre essay). Audiences who approach
nonfiction genres with expectations of absolute truth or straightforward facts leave themselves vulnerable and thereby shirk their own responsibilities.

But equally as important, the audience—especially of autobiographical narratives—has a responsibility to be generous, to meet the author halfway: “[F]ilmmakers are not the only ones with biased interpretations and responses… audiences, too, must acknowledge their own subjectivity” (E.C., genre essay). Students’ attention to their own knee-jerk reactions highlighted that same (or rather, different) subjective vision on the side of audiences. And that entailed, at least with Moore, attending to one’s prejudices. As several students noted, although they had never seen one of his movies before, they had “heard of him before,” which “made a difference” to their responses (B.B., blog, 10/13). Likewise, their visceral responses to Tarnation suggested the need for circumspection: “I feel as if I need to watch this movie at least a dozen times to grasp its complexities” (K.D., blog, 10/25). Part of that process is to “[f]orget whether we personally like a film and think of it objectively. As always though, that’s easier said then done” (M.K., blog, 10/28). Through active performance of their audience roles, students conscientiously negotiated their initial subjective responses to primary texts in order to play the part of the authorial audience, which in turn contributed to a more nuanced critical view of the whole rhetorical situation.

6.3 Rhetoric & Identification: Building Relationships for Influence

As students’ experiences demonstrated, analyzing the rhetorical considerations of autobiographical documentaries highlights the ethical dimensions of communication, not just within a text but also through a text. That is, in most instances of autobiographical documentary, where the author is unknown to his or her audiences, the design of the text
determines their relationship. (As the case of Moore suggested, a well-known source complicates these relationships considerably.) The video composition must therefore accomplish the central rhetorical move students identified at the heart of autobiographical narrative: identification. In order to influence audiences’ beliefs or behaviors, authors must often ask those audiences to see things their way, to align themselves even temporarily with the authors’ point of view: “The more the audience can relate to the story teller the more willing they will be to listen to his opinions on issues and the more sympathetic and understanding they will be towards his side of the argument” (V.D., genre essay). Students noted that despite misguided demands for objectivity, what audiences really respond to is an interactive experience with other subjectivities: “Successful autobiographical documentaries reach out and connect with their audiences because they are asking these audiences to participate in and respond to their personal experiences, and what they believe to be key issues” (B.B., genre essay). This goal of audience participation necessitates careful attention to two varieties of identification: with the narrator’s personality or with the represented experiences.

Students’ discussions of identification often revolved around the first, more obvious type: an audience decides the author is like him or her, and therefore that the author’s arguments or experiences have bearing on the audience’s own. For some students, neglecting identification was risky: “If the voice of the director differs too far from that of the viewer, he is likely to lose his credibility and his arguments, no matter how well-supported, will fall on deaf ears” (R.Z., genre essay). Although identification often depends upon commonality, commonality alone cannot ensure identification. Students noted that although Moore and Caouette seemed more like them (in terms of
age, geography, language, and culture) they found Folman’s foreign language, location, and medium far less alienating than either Caouette’s fragmented artist or Moore’s “annoying, pushy, and rather manipulative” everyman (C.D., blog, 10/9). Students’ interpretation of Bashir’s message about the senseless waste of war reinforced this identification. Even if they weren’t Folman’s primary target audience, they were at least one: young adults inheriting a world of conflict they don’t fully understand or approve of but are forced to cope with. And so the character of a man struggling to come to terms with his own and his country’s history felt compatible with their own characters. This attention to self-characterization helped students assess the risks and rewards of certain choices. For example, they all agreed that a sense of humor can be appealing, but for every charming Spurlock there’s a grating Moore. Likewise, pandering to an audience’s assumed preferences can backfire, as with Caouette’s avant-gard style: “[H]e was trying way too hard to reach his intended young audience with all of the flashy and artsy stuff and in turn just distracted me and made me feel like he wasn’t genuine” (B.B., blog, 11/1). As these comments suggest, identification has both risks and rewards; determining which qualities to forefront and how, depended on an astute reading of the rhetorical context, audience, and agenda.

In addition to the author’s perceived personality, students found themselves identifying with well-orchestrated experiences. Even, or especially, if an experience is foreign to their own, careful manipulation of audio and visual effects can help an audience share the author’s emotional state. This may be accomplished technically, as when a director remains behind the camera so the audience is “seeing things from his perspective” while “hear[ing] what they are thinking out loud” in the voiceover (E.C.,
analysis essay). It can be metaphorical, as when filmmakers “guide and invite the audience on the journey the documentary is taking” (B.J., analysis essay). Or it can simply be a factor of the first-person plural that positions the audience alongside the director and thereby “makes sure that it does not seem that he is talking down to his audience” (V.D., analysis essay). Ironically, students noted, the strategies that can help an audience get a real sense the author’s experience are often the least realistic: Moore’s chronological liberties with the escalating economic crisis, the frenetic effects that represent Caouette’s mental states in *Tarnation*, the dreamlike animation of memory in *Waltz with Bashir*. Such rhetorical choices can immerse the audience in an experience, elicit the visceral reactions that help an audience feel a connection with the author, however unpleasant: “Although it [*Tarnation*] was a very disturbing film, it moved me. As much as I never want to watch that film again, I catch myself thinking about it… I could feel how Jonathon was feeling just by experiencing his film” (R.A., blog, 10/23). Recreating an emotional or physical experience can establish an empathetic connection between author and audience that transcends difference and enhances influence. As they constructed their own documentaries, to which we turn now, students carefully considered the kinds of identification strategies that would make the audience not just *like* them, but feel like them, see the world through their eyes. Ultimately, they decided, this relationship would determine how, or if, their narratives influenced their audiences.

7. Transformed Practice

Throughout the critical framing process described above, students were also coming to terms with their anxieties about the looming video composition project. In a shift from Chapter 2, the technical aspects of multimodal composing were ultimately less
problematic than the conceptual challenges. Whereas most students tended to feel confident as film critics, especially with the new analytic vocabulary, only a couple had prior experiences working with video. But most initial concerns were ameliorated by the introduction of iMovie, the ease of which helped make students “a little bit less stressed” (S.K., blog, 10/26). For most, exploring the tools and tricks of video composition tipped the scale in a positive direction: “Even just getting out the cameras and going out filming was enough to get me excited about starting the filming and editing process” (E.C., blog, 10/29). However, much like the students in Chapter 2, those in this class tended to doubt the tellability of their life experiences:

Is anyone else completely dreading making this autobiographical documentary? I can barely write about myself in an informal context let alone make a movie about myself… I’m not going to lie I think this is a great project and I’m excited to learn how to use the technology but I would rather be able to make a documentary about something a lot more interesting than myself. I know Kate said that we don’t need to have extraordinary lives, we just need to show our lives in a new way but my life is way too boring even for that. (M.K., blog, 10/10)

This sentiment arose several times during the first few weeks of the term as students confessed, “I don’t know how I can talk about myself in a way that will interest people” (Z.K., blog, 10/11). Over the course of the term, however, as they examined multiple autobiographical documentaries, students expanded their early notions of what autobiographical stories should or could be to include slice-of-life tales, deliberately constructed experiences, research processes, and relationships as viable alternatives to the classic whole-life retrospective. By redefining autobiography as the “telling of a tale that revolves around the self” (K.D., genre essay), students eventually settled on either a topic or experience they considered worth telling and sharing.
Considering who would be interested or influenced by these autobiographical documentaries, almost all students tended toward an audience of their peers.\textsuperscript{59} As one ruefully explained, “I am sure that this audience is not very original to this class, but it is the audience that I have the most in common with, and it is the audience that I care most about” (K.D., proposal). It was also an audience with whom they had enough in common to assume shared preferences: “[T]his means that I must be careful not to alienate them by pushing an idea on them like Michael Moore. Instead I should be subtle in my message and let it be interpretable in many ways (P.A., proposal). Other primary texts offered alternative models in which “the underlying message of the film was not so much as a message, but a question, which we, as viewers, are suppose to answer for ourselves” (M.B., blog, 11/1). In light of their own responses to primary texts, students were often quite clear in their wish to avoid a confrontational approach: “I don’t want to bash them over the head with information and preach to them… because that would get nothing but a negative response from my target audience” (K.D., proposal). Others offered variations on this strategy: “I will try to portray my story without pressuring them…” (M.K., proposal); “At no point do I want to simply tell someone what should matter most in their life. Rather, I want my audience to think” (Z.R., proposal). Toward these ends, students emphasized identification, subtlety, and a degree of interpretive openness that would encourage audiences to participate actively in their own persuasion.

In the sections that follow, I offer rhetorical analyses of three students’ autobiographical documentaries that demonstrate their deployment of these resources. As

\footnote{The two exceptions included one student who composed an account of a memorable vacation for her family and another who directed her documentary toward parents of young children who might be swayed by her positive experience with home-schooling during kindergarten.}
mentioned previously, these three videos won the their peers’ praise and votes for the class awards ceremony. Although each of these students’ compositions reflects careful attention to all of the elements of the narrative toolkit, I have focused my discussions on the particular category that seem most central to their rhetorical effectiveness. In the first, the best-picture winning author’s polyvocal narration and shifting focalization work to build audience identification across a significant difference; Jim expanded his audiences’—and his own—perspectives by exploiting the resources of multimedia narration. The second featured documentary, winner of the best story award, offers a communal kind of self-representation. Dillon documented the affectionate squabbling of his housemates, crafting a relatable ‘family’ story out of the mundane details of college life. In the third selection, which won the award for best directing, the documentarian offers a moving and pointed representation of an other: her grandmother. Through careful construction and judicious textual cues, Karen struck a delicate balance among documenting someone else’s life, acknowledging the inadequacy of that representation, and using it to convey a persuasive message to her audience. I’ve arranged these narratives according to their resemblance to the conventional personal narrative genre: Jim’s classic self-exploration, Dillon’s friendship-oriented variation, and Karen’s other-focused alternative. In each, the author offers evidence of his or her critical response to this project’s challenges. Taken together, these three autobiographical documentaries provide a glimpse into students’ developing rhetorical literacies and point to the pedagogical effects of treating personal narratives as rhetorical acts.
7.2 Jim’s “Beneath the Uniform”: (Re)Presenting the Self

According to his fellow students, the best picture created in this class was Jim’s “ROTC at The Ohio State University: Beneath the Uniform.” Like several other students, Jim engaged a defining life choice and its consequences. For most, this meant picking a major or career path; for Jim, it meant reflecting on the consequences of a choice he’d already made. “Beneath the Uniform” documents Jim’s experiences in the Reserve Officers’ Training Corp (ROTC) program, focusing less on his decision to join than on the everyday implications: the misperceptions of civilians, the anticipation of violence, and the emotions of loved ones. The video’s strategic composition reflects Jim’s negotiation of the challenges of communicating oneself to others, moving beyond self-representation toward self-presentation as public performance (Goffman, 1959; Newkirk, 1997). In this way, his documentary may be productively considered as a narrative portrait, “a rhetorical design inviting the authorial audience to apprehend the revelation of character” (Phelan, 2007, p.23). Jim’s careful attention to rhetorical considerations ensured that this self-portrait does not remain at the level of expressivism or devolve into solipsism. It also reflected the high stakes of this personal narrative for Jim, the weight added to self-exploration performed for an audience and for a purpose. The result is a thought-provoking account of the fears and hopes that attend his participation in ROTC, brought to vivid life through layered narration. After assessing his rhetorical situation, I offer an analysis of Jim’s telling strategies—the voices, views, and soundtrack that transformed a personal reflection into public presentation.
7.2.1 Jim’s Narrative Occasion: Bonding with Buckeyes

From the beginning, Jim didn’t share his classmates’ concerns over the tellability of their life stories. He knew that his experiences in ROTC, like his weekly uniform, set him apart from many of his peers. Jim’s awareness of his physically marked difference had been addressed in the course blog and arose again in his proposal for the documentary: “I can remember the first time I walked across campus in my uniform, and I was not sure whether to be proud or embarrassed by the looks that I was receiving at the time. It is interesting to try to determine their thoughts” (proposal). Jim believed those thoughts were, in large part, negative associations of ROTC with high school troublemakers, and so his initial goal was to correct, or at least challenge, those stereotypes. But when his first series of interviews with college students didn’t reveal a negative attitude so much as a general ignorance of what it means to be in ROTC, his purpose shifted away from confrontation: “[I]nstead of bluntly correcting their thoughts, my goal is to give the audience a personal testimony about some fears and realities of being in ROTC that may change their minds” (proposal). The title of Jim’s documentary refers back to that outward sign of his difference. By offering audiences a glimpse “Beneath the Uniform,” he asks them to look past the surface representation to understand some of the realities of “ROTC at The Ohio State University.” Jim’s rhetorical agenda meant that his actual audience in the class was in line with his implied audience of the civilian college student. To share the realities of his ROTC life, Jim crafted a gripping, nuanced documentary marked by plurality of voices and perspectives.
7.2.2 Narration in “Beneath the Uniform”: Layering Voices and Views

7.2.2.1 Face to Face with the First Person

The storyteller’s presence is strong from the bold opening “Directed by” credit to the dramatic audio rush of the plane engines over the title screen. Jim’s talking head appears immediately, launching right into a description of the Reserve Offer’s Training Corp. This direct narration, in which he faces and speaks directly to the audience, appears regularly throughout the video, grounding the audience’s attention in the person at the center of the drama. The filming of this narration is up close and personal, and Jim’s body language is casual. Amidst the adrenaline and emotion, his appearance is calm, authoritative. But he also relies upon other speakers to provide alternative perspectives: the booming voice of a commanding officer, an inaudible/subtitled fellow cadet, two admittedly ignorant college guys, and his proud, nervous parents. These characters provide multiple outside views of Jim, offering just a sample of the forces at play in his life. The accumulative effect of these talking heads is a multifaceted but controlled presentation of Jim’s identity-in-process. The visual and audio narration adds depth to this self-presentation and invites the audience to share some of his experiences.

7.2.2.2 Identification through Focalization

Jim’s visual narration relies on two complementary lines of identification: First, he characterizes himself as like his audience, and second, he creates a vicarious experience for the audience. The emphasis on the local setting in the title and opening shots is an act of strategic identification, as are the images of cadets participating in campus life, folding the American flag on the football field of the beloved “Shoe” stadium. (Such a blatant appeal to Buckeye Pride was a common move in this project.)
These students knew their audiences, and they exploited the power of that identification.

Jim’s selection of images, here and elsewhere, situates him firmly within the OSU community. He’s just another college student who loves the Buckeyes, his country, and his family—a holy trinity of identification with his audience. Even if the audience doesn’t think they’re like him, they kind of have to like him.

Perhaps the more interesting rhetorical move is Jim’s use of first-person focalization to provide the audience a glimpse inside his head. Jim’s story begins and ends in the sky and in motion. These repeated images of flight invite the audience to share in his exhilaration at the beauty and power he experiences as a pilot. In between, on the group, he also presents close-up views from his perspective. In a subtle early shot, as he talks about getting mixed reactions walking around campus in his uniform, the audience is treated to a jerky hand-held filming of that walk. This effect is more obvious during the in-your-face clips of violence and danger, especially those that appear while Jim discusses his fear of dying. The first-person point of view on the dangers of war and flight immerse the audience in those scenes. When combined with the audio track, these visuals work like a jolt of adrenaline, a chance for the audience to feel some of the author’s own visceral fears. That brutal reality is one that Jim himself had not yet experienced, but the issue of violence is addressed as constant subtext for members of the military and everyday citizens. The fear he evokes with these scenes works to connect him and the audience by acknowledging what’s on all of their minds. The audience thereby is able to witness just enough to understand how little they can understand of Jim’s life. Their identification is therefore necessarily in spite of significant differences, but those differences need not preclude connection.
7.2.2.3 Signaling with Sound

One of Jim’s key tools in orchestrating his connection with the audience was the audio track. From the opening “eighty decibels of jet noise to initially get the viewers’ attention” to the fine-tuned seconds of silence later, Jim’s use of sound is carefully selected and timed (reflection). The musical choices help create the structure of the whole: The driving opening riff injects energy into the introduction of ROTC, Jim, and his themes. In the central portion, no music accompanies Jim’s reflections on the dangers of military life. And as the mood lifts again, the swelling music reinforces Jim’s reflections on the dream of flying. The lyrics of these songs, likewise, are message-specific. Blur’s “Song 2,” a.k.a. “Woo Hoo” (1997), provides a funky rebellious spirit for the introduction. For the most part, the lyrics are ducked under other voices, but Jim raises the volume for effect at two points. Immediately after a college student notes that he “didn’t know what to think” about ROTCs on campus, there’s a pause for the taunting line “It’s not my problem” over a picture of Jim and a friend in uniforms and sunglasses, arms crossed and expressions tough. Such a moment offers relief from the otherwise serious tone of Jim’s story and offers a hint of a playful personality. Similarly, the “Oh shit” that accompanies the gun shot transition to the discussion of risks is a reality check for author and audience. With no music in the background, Jim speaks about the probability of his deployment and his fear of death, punctuated by footage of planes crashing and missile fire. After a moment of silence over an empty black screen, rising music and an idyllic flight scene begin the final section.

This second song is more reflective to suit the final section’s themes of family pride and personal dreams. Along with its uplifting tones, Thirteen Senses’ “Into the
Fire” (2004) is also more lyrically pointed. Metaphors of flight, references to extremes, and repeated command to “explain, explain” play as Jim reveals his family’s military roots, his younger brother’s similar choices, and his own motivation: “My biggest drive is just that thought of being a pilot one day. Whenever I have any doubts or fears about what could happen to me, I just think of that vision. Because to me, it’s worth it.” After this last word, the song lyrics continue, “Come on, come on, put your hand into the fire. Explain, explain, as I turn and meet the power… Pull up, pull up, from one extreme to another. From the summer to the spring, from the mountain to the air…” The resulting impression of mystery, risk, and courage coincides with Jim’s concluding shot, an OSU flag in a fighter jet window, and the alphabetic text “to be continued” as the music fades.

Jim’s use of music is matched by his strategic use of silence. Between these powerful songs, that middle section about military engagement has no soundtrack, adding to the intensity of the audience’s attention. Similarly, deliberate pauses throughout leave space for the audience to think. The most arresting example of this occurs after Jim recounts his response to a question about whether he’s afraid of dying. His response—“In all honesty…the only response I can say… only if I think about it too much”—is interrupted/punctuated by images of planes exploding and soldiers under fire. The subtle power of this clip is explained in his reflection:

The intent here was to not only bring a sense of reality about fear and death to the audience, but also to demonstrate that I do think about it sometimes, and it would be impractical to think that I do not. Moreover, the following one and a half seconds of silence after the response is critical. It gives the audience time to think about what was said, and to verify that the tone is now much more serious. (reflection)
Another pause occurs before his mother appears in order to emphasize her relative importance. The heavy tone of this final section requires another moment of stillness: “Lastly, after the screen goes black and before my name appears, there is a brief pause to give one last moment for the audience to soak in everything, because there was a lot of content given” (reflection). This content is delivered through a multimodal narration that took advantage of the affordances of video to invite Jim’s audience “Beneath the Uniform.”

7.2.3 Critical Framing: Documenting the Self to Others

The alignment of Jim’s developing rhetorical literacy with his evolving sense of identity, this video composition testifies to his critical engagement with personal storytelling. Throughout the term, Jim contributed quiet, thoughtful questions and comments; like most military students of my experience, he was consistently on time, prepared, and ready to work. But he was also skeptical, as an early blog post indicates: “All of the information and assumptions that we were able to make about Moore’s rhetoric made sense as we were picking apart the montage, but I can’t help but wonder how much he actually intended for us to notice, or if he even noticed himself” (blog, 10/19). Although comments turned the conversation toward the tensions between authorial intention and audience response, I feared he would retain a lingering sense that analysis somehow both does authors a disservice and also gives them too much credit. So when Jim’s reflection on the documentary process began by recalling that same post, it was a particularly sweet moment for me:

Earlier in the quarter, I wrote a blog post concerning the intent of the director versus the interpretations and assumptions of the audience, and questioned how
much they actually aligned. Originally, I leaned more towards the idea that the director can only intend so much in the midst of his construction, and I assumed that most audiences, when critically analyzing, pull more out of some films or texts than what was intended to be put in by the creator. However, through the experience of creating my own documentary, “Air Force ROTC: Beneath the Uniform,” my mind has changed. (reflection)

The research process motivated by class discussions pushed Jim beyond his own perception of self to not only consider others’ views but also include them as an integral part of a realistic representation of himself. These other voices, as he noted in his reflection, challenged his preconceptions about his relationship to audiences of the documentary—and those he encounters in his everyday life. By narrating a mutually respectful relationship within his text, it seems, Jim was able to perform or enact that dynamic beyond the text.

As a rhetorical text, this autobiographical documentary works to develop a connection between the author and an audience that is both like and unlike him. The rhetorical sophistication of “Beneath the Uniform” reflects Jim’s respect for his audience, whom he had determined to be the class community and other civilian college students. He trusted their analytic skills to read his text effectively, to participate in constructing his portrait. Although Jim had revised his purpose—from correcting audience misconceptions to offering new perspectives—he remained concerned with challenging audience assumptions. By incorporating the perspectives of average college students on ROTC, Jim acknowledged those stereotypes en route to undermining them. Tellingly, the success of his agenda is indicated in a later clip by one of these civilian students acknowledging respect for ROTC. The fact that this respect seems to be relatively
newfound, perhaps even connected to his participation in Jim’s project, positions this student as a kind of in-text authorial audience.

In his final reflection, Jim credited the shift in his approach for allowing him to develop a positive relationship with that audience, and also for making his task less difficult and more personally rewarding: “[T]he purpose of the film changed from teaching and correcting the audience to showing the audience something they may not have noticed before. This shift in focus proved to be much more flexible to work with, and it was much less threatening to the viewers” (reflection). The key change was that Jim didn’t really need to argue against prejudice; he just needed to tell his story, to represent his reality in order to influence his audiences’ perceptions. In most ways, Jim positioned himself alongside his target audience, but that identification must occur across a defining difference. Despite the connection developed throughout the documentary, the audience is ultimately left outside Jim’s life. The final screen reinforces this distance: over an image of a fighter jet in mid-flight (with an OSU flag in the window), Jim’s story is “to be continued” in a future that will likely remain unknown to the audience. In this light, “Beneath the Uniform” might seem to fit the mold of self-absorbed digital storytelling. But as his analytic reflection on the documentary process revealed, this self-awareness was both secondary to, and a consequence of, the rhetorical approach to autobiographical narrative:

If anything was learned while making this documentary, it was identifying the critical aspect of making a connection between audience and composer in such a way that the viewer can find the author’s meaning, and maybe their own. That critical aspect is rhetoric, and it comes in countless forms. Furthermore, its versatility allows it to be applied to all aspects of communication, whether it is a
writing assignment for a class, a job interview for a corporation, or even a military brief for a staff of generals. Rhetoric allows one to communicate that he or she has something important to say, and conversely, it allows the audience to interact accordingly. (reflection)

That final verb—interact—illuminates the dialogic understanding of communication that resulted from Jim’s participation in course discussions and resulted in a persuasive self-presentation that earned his peers’ praise and his own pride.

**7.3 Dillon’s “A Family of Men”: Representing the Communal Self**

Dillon’s documentary stands in nicely for a significant percentage of students’ projects that were about negotiating the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Often these stories revolved around their discovery/creation of a new community of friends and colleagues that came to resemble a family. Dillon’s “A Family of Men” works within this frame; it also reflects those projects in which students examined and celebrated the everyday joys of college living. In this, like Jim’s documentary, Dillon’s composition may be understood as a narrative portrait, a snapshot of the present-in-process: Five young men share a home and wrangle over housework, teasing and blaming each other with (generally) good cheer. Through Dillon’s strategic composition, their situation achieves a depth and relevance that might speak to the audience about their own relationships and interpersonal communication styles.

This documentary reflects students’ newly expansive understanding of the tellable autobiographical tale: the characters and their issues are common, average, seemingly unremarkable. These factors may explain why “A Family of Men” won the student award for best story: The audience responded positively to the familiar settings and characters, and to the ordinary events unfolding in their lives every day. Dillon’s rhetorical
strategies, like his reflections on the process, offer a fairly typical picture of other students’ experiences: Wary at first, he developed confidence through critical exercises and ended up enjoying both the process and the final product, a video he was pleased to share with the class and his friends. Below, after considering Dillon’s assessment of his rhetorical agenda, I examine the major categories of story (characters, plot, settings) in “A Family of Men” to demonstrate how he lent tellability to this ordinary tale.

7.3.1 Dillon’s Narrative Occasion: The College Connection

Like many of his classmates, Dillon addressed an audience of his peers: “My target audience is the class, as well as other college students living in off campus housing or dorms that I think will be able to relate extremely well to my situation” (proposal). He designed his appeals accordingly, connecting with his audiences through a humorous, relatable (for some), and low-key representation of his friends—many of whom, it’s worth noting, were also friends of other students in the class. (In fact, a few of these characters appeared in other students’ documentaries, an entertaining element for student as each others’ audiences.) Other college kids, as Dillon knew, could see themselves in that messy scene, in that tight community: “I want my audience to laugh while watching this film and relate to a similar situation they may have in their house. If they can’t relate because they do not experience these situations I want the audience to be able to understand what goes on and be able to appreciate the humor in it” (proposal). His rhetorical choices were designed to enable this identification with, or at least understanding of, a seemingly idiosyncratic autobiographical experience, transforming it into a communal reflection on friendship that goes deep enough to resemble “family.”
7.3.2 The Story of “A Family of Men”: Reveling in the Mundane

7.3.2.1 Everyday Events in Local Spaces

I combine plot and setting in this section because they are inextricable: the plot revolves around the shared home that contains and dominates the story told in this documentary. As a result, the story has a clearly limited setting (the house) and cast of characters. Dillon wanted to show “how the house functions by itself,” without outside commentary or critique (proposal). The interviews are all set in the living room, “so people can be captured where they spend a lot of their time, and where most of the arguments take place”; this setting helps maintain the “natural” style of their everyday interactions (proposal). “A Family of Men” does not have a conventional plot, in that there are few significant events: just conversations about the housework that seem to be ongoing rather than specific to one occasion. During the present captured on video, a recent party has exacerbated the situation and precipitated one scene of an in-process argument. Even this dramatic scene doesn’t constitute a turning point; it’s just another moment in their developing relationships. Dillon’s narrative is about the bigger picture captured by this snapshot: the unfolding drama of young men learning to live together “without any motherly influences” (proposal).

7.3.2.2 Just Us Guys

In a lot of ways, Dillon deliberately fades into the crowd in this documentary. Without the opening credits, the audience would not necessarily be able to identify the author within the cast of characters. As the director, Dillon wasn’t trying to hide his involvement; he designed these moves to “portray me to the audience as more credible because I am actually participating in discussions and seen giving my own opinion on
things” (proposal). Dillon’s camera work indicates his immersion in the scene, especially during the argument in the kitchen, when his voice can also be heard from behind the camera. The choice of music and first-person camera work invite the audience to identify with his self-conscious take on the story, especially the self-deprecating humor that marks this documentary. In the opening sequence, Christina Aguilera’s “Dirrty” (2002) plays over images of laundry piles, dishes, and toilet stains: “Dirty… filthy… nasty… too dirty to clean my act up… If you ain’t dirty, you ain’t here to party.” With this introduction, the audience is invited to laugh at and with the characters before they even appear.

The title “A Family of Men” directs the audience’s attention to the group dynamic; throughout, their voices work to build identification across/through the filth. The entire cast of characters, identified by only their names, provides the vocal narration of this family of men. In the absence of voiceover or alphabetic narration, this storytelling comes across as communal: everyone’s telling the story together. The members of this family are a bunch of white male college students, seemingly average and similar. They’re generally good-natured and clearly relaxed, as one’s unselfconscious (and uncensored) scratching demonstrates. Their personalities emerge through their interviews and interactions, but individuality is not the focus here. Instead, Dillon emphasizes their collective experience, the multivocal reality of living together. The decision to exclude other voices reinforces the centrality of the group: “I do not want to include any outside people. I think that would take away from… how the house functions by itself” (proposal). The resulting combination of characterizing lyrics and multiple, sometimes overlapping, voices effectively makes the protagonist(s) of this story the entire crew.
Towards the end, two characters are singled out for particularly egregious dirtiness. In this concluding sequence, Dillon collects the others’ comments about who makes the most mess. All of the guys name Korman and Garber, who are shown looking thoughtful, unable to answer the question. Garber laughs and admits, “probably me” before Korman, with furrowed brow, asks furtively, “Am I the dirtiest?” On this joke, the documentary ends, leaving a final, subtle point: they deal with their family issues internally and with humor. The fact that Korman and Garber are called out on their slacking is softened by the fact that they end up pointing the fingers at themselves. This scapegoating, like the documentary as a whole, isn’t necessarily about changing anything. Instead, it works to add personality to the crowd and confirm their family-style dynamic.

Dillon’s rhetorical characterizations invite the audience to identify with the group experience, the familiarity of friendships that negotiate tensions with humor and, occasionally, tough love. This spin on the story expands its resonance beyond college students but remains particularly appealing to a young audience learning to navigate their adult lives.

7.3.3 Critical Framing: Documenting the Self among Others

“A Family of Men,” as we’ve seen, depends on a collective experience to build common ground with the audience. The decision to represent a home community was both tempting and worrying for students. On the one hand, they recognized that these relationships matter, to them and potentially to their audience; on the other, they had just spent weeks discussing the challenges of handling subjects ethically while also pursuing a rhetorical agenda. Dillon’s purpose was simply to offer a slice of real life without moralizing, a goal that neatly sidestepped the temptations of manipulation but also
exposed his subjects to outside scrutiny. For their sake and that of his credibility as director, Dillon was careful about how he handled the comedic representation of his friends, going beyond basic informed consent by screening the final product documentary for its subjects first. Indeed, Dillon made the documentary with these viewers in mind as much as the class or other college students. As the final moment in the documentary, Dillon turns back to this core audience, offering “special thanks” to “my housemates for letting me show this somewhat embarrassing footage.” In a way, grounding his rhetorical situation in these local narrative occasions enabled Dillon to appeal to wider audiences. The value placed on open dialogue and good humor emerged as a subtext that deepens the audience’s response without hitting them over the head. Dillon’s video demonstrates his understanding that rhetoric doesn’t have to be about overt argumentation; it’s also about influence, the seemingly minor details that can communicate volumes.

The fact that this video won students’ designation as best story is a testament to Dillon’s rhetorically savvy telling, particularly his ability to appeal to his target audience. To translate an average autobiography into an engaging documentary, Dillon had to first overcome his doubt about both the tellability of his life and his technical ability to represent it in video. Dillon’s pleased surprise at the award helped complete the turnaround he experienced throughout the course:

When I first found out I would have to make a documentary I remember being slightly annoyed. Writing an essay would have been so much easier and a lot less time consuming. I think the reason I felt this way was because I really had no idea how to do it, or what to do a documentary on that anyone would be interested in seeing. As it turns out I loved doing this project. It has by far been my favorite project I have ever done in an English class. (reflection)
It’s worth noting that this realization preceded the award. Dillon’s reward for persevering was the authorization of both his story and his telling as worthy of audience attention. The key to his success, he indicated, was the dialogic process of analysis and practice within the larger course conversations:

At the beginning of the quarter I was very worried about making this documentary. However, after watching them in class and rhetorically analyzing them I began to get a better idea of how to make mine. I learned about many of the different strategies I could incorporate, as well as the strategies that I should steer clear of. Most of what to steer clear of I learned from Michael Moore’s film and “Tarnation.” I learned not to portray myself like Michael Moore and not to overdue the special effects from “Tarnation.” I learned a great deal about what works from listening to the comments and analysis of class mates, as well as what people had to say on the blog. Another thing I learned in this class was that documentaries are not what I thought they were. I used to believe that they were all boring fly on the wall films with some bland voice doing a voice over about something or another. (reflection)

By heeding the warnings and advice of his local audience, Dillon was able to craft a story that was both specific to his friends and engaging to other young people in similar situations. In a conventional personal narrative assignment, such subject matter might have seemed silly or myopic, lacking in the expected reflective moralizing. The hybrid genre of autobiographical documentary, and the class’s discussions into the issues they raise, prompted Dillon to revise his assumptions. By designating his audience and exploiting the resources of video, Dillon designed a communal portrait of friendship that offered insight into his relationships and a stronger sense of his rhetorical capabilities. The fact that he documented such an ordinary, seemingly pointless story was exactly why the experience illuminated the everyday workings of rhetoric. Attending to the textual
strategies of such seemingly low-stakes narrative can attune students to the powerful forces that surround them on the broader public stage.

7.4 Karen’s “The Necklace”: Representing an Other

Karen’s documentary took on the ethical and rhetorical challenges of representing another person through one’s own perspective. A good percentage of students addressed important relationships in their lives, in particular those that were difficult or going through a period of change. Given their scrutiny of other documentarians’ treatments of their subjects, these students were well aware of the pitfalls. But they also recognized the value of working through complicated issues through the process of representing them to an audience. Like Jim, Karen came up with her idea early:

I am going to follow the story of the necklace that my grandmother gave me for my sixteenth birthday. The necklace says on it, “This is your lucky star” in German. While this is perhaps my grandmother’s most prized possession, it is also painfully ironic. Her life has been characterized by death and it seems almost “unlucky” how many people she has lost in her life. Through the story of the necklace I want to explore the effect of death in my grandmother’s life. (proposal)

“The Necklace” offers a story within a story within a story: in tracing the history of her titular charm, the narrator engages her grandmother in conversation and offers a brief history of her life. Karen recognized the centrality of pathos to this project, which aimed at “allowing young adults living in the 21st century to see their grandparents not as just history but as children and teens like us who were greatly affected by their culture” (proposal). In a performance that earned the award for best telling/direction, Karen employed careful cues to construct a relationship in which audiences find themselves identifying with the author’s identification with her subject. Karen thereby worked to
persuade her peers to follow her lead while avoiding the preaching that might alienate them.

7.4.1 Karen’s Narrative Occasion: Engaging her Generation

Karen’s understanding of her rhetorical situation emerged from the story she wanted to share about her grandmother’s life. More particularly, she hoped sharing this personal history would encourage the audience to look differently at their own families’ narratives and the important figures they may have been neglecting. In this, she imagined an audience like herself and her peers: young and somewhat self-involved:

My target audience is really my generation of young adults. I think that this specific audience has grown up somewhat disconnected from our grandparents because we live in a drastically different world than the one they grew up in. A separation exists because we don’t really understand each other. I think it is really important for my generation to see their grandparents as people—to understand that our grandparents were teenagers once, too, and that the period of time in which they grew up really shaped them. (proposal)

The problem, Karen suspected, was that this kind of reflection is too rare amidst the bustle of everyday life, leaving young people clueless about and careless of the family histories that shape their present. In workshops, Karen discussed how her grandmother’s difficult life had made her seem “hard” to younger members of the family; enjoying a closer bond, she wanted to help the next generation become more empathetic. Thus, her concern was not just to capture her grandmother’s often tragic history (though that understanding was important to her) but to persuade her audience to adopt a new perspective:

I hope that this documentary will help the audience to see their own parents and grandparents as people with histories who have shaped them into the parents and
grandparents that they are today. I also hope to explore how we inherit not only material things from our parents and grandparents’ pasts but also, how we inherit the emotions and pains of their past through the ways that they raise us. (proposal)

Karen recognized the challenge she faced in asking her generation to listen to their elders or even to her suggestion that they listen. Her story didn’t lend itself to humor or multimedia flash, and it ran the risk of seeming too heavy-handed in its persuasive purpose. In comparison with many other students’ documentaries, “The Necklace” is overtly rhetorical. Karen did want to influence how her audience thinks about and acts toward their older relatives, yet she didn’t want to seem to be preaching to the audience. This is a fine line to walk. Karen accomplished it by representing her own process of discovery as a model to the audience.

7.4.2 Designing “The Necklace”: Delicate Cues and Intricate Construction

7.4.2.1 Prioritization through Positioning

Karen’s decision to remain behind the camera focalizes Char’s story through Karen’s perspective—and positions the viewer alongside her, as listener. These choices were both ethical and rhetorical. Karen did not want to reduce her grandmother to just that role; she wanted to let the subject speak for herself: “The lack of my voice, and therefore the overpowering presence of her own, makes the shift from ‘her role in my life’ to just her life” (reflection). The opening shot establishes this focus on Char, who nods and smiles as if she had just been introduced to the audience. After the title wipes across the screen, Char’s voice immediately begins recounting the details of when her father gave her that necklace. She seems to speak directly to the audience here, and it is not until she says she gave it “to you” that the viewer realizes he/she is sharing the perspective of the author. This shared vantage point connects author and audience as they
both witness Char’s life story. Throughout, this dynamic continues as Char addresses both Karen and the viewer. Karen’s few spoken questions, always from behind the camera, create a dialogic dynamic. Likewise, the alphabetic narration of Karen’s own reflections is spare; the clean white-on-black titles reinforce her direction of the audience’s attention.

By choosing this method of relating my own ideas to the readers, I think that I successfully eliminate the portion of my self that makes the story more about me… The absence of my direct voice also helps to make the film less about me and more about my grandmother, and for the viewers, less about themselves and more about these older influences in their lives. (reflection)

The overall effect is intimate yet somehow formal, a style that mirrors the balance of personal revelation and privacy. Like Char, Karen is restrained in her storytelling, cuing audience interpretation based as much on what she leaves out as what she includes. Char’s prominent appearance and privileged voice dominate the narration, but the guiding hand of the author is apparent in the textual construction that builds audience response.

7.4.2.2 Assembling the (Partial) Past

Present for only a fraction of her grandmother’s life, Karen would never fully know Char, a limitation she embraced as fundamental to the documentary’s representation that could only be partial and filtered. The story is visually presented primarily through family pictures, especially of Char at younger ages, a move that helps to “put my grandmother’s life in perspective,” to highlight those parts of her life that precede/exclude Karen (reflection). These images of the past are sepia-toned and caressed by iMovie’s “Ken Burns effect” to add movement and drama to still images; shots often
linger in close-up. The majority of the video, between Char’s talking head clips, is made up of these carefully selected and arranged images that work to draw connections between past and present. For example,

I purposefully placed the photo of her with me at Northwestern University near photos of her as a college student at Northwestern. To see this modern photo of me as an adolescent and her as a grandmother and then an old photo of her as an adolescent is almost startling for me… It really captures a huge aspect of the film: our grandparents and parents were once our age; the teenager in those photos is the same person who is now my grandmother. It seems like a simple concept but do we truly **grasp** it? If we did, we would perhaps not see our lives as separate from our grandparents’ past and instead, see their stories as a part of our own.

(Reflection)

Karen’s handling of past and present manages to both layer them and hold them in tension, suggesting that recovering the past may be essential to understanding the present, but the past can never truly be recovered.

This tension is reinforced in the scene in which Char looks over her shoulder at Karen, who asks, “Tell me something that I never knew about you.” Her grandmother replies, “There’s so much, I absolutely don’t know where to start.” The next image is of Char as a young woman, again looking at the camera over her shoulder. That deliberate staging and repeated body language grant Char an elusive quality; it also positions Karen (and the audience) again as a listener, an engaged, even supplicant audience. Even as she tries to understand her grandmother, Karen acknowledges that her representation of Char’s life cannot presume to offer her whole story. Instead, the documentary narrows to focus on the central motif of the necklace and its (ironic) history. A gift passed down through several generations, the necklace is meant to be the wearer’s “lucky star.” But, as
the textual narration goes on to explain, Char’s life has been rather unlucky: her father, who gave her the necklace when she was, died when she was 7, followed by her mother at 16, followed by a series of close relatives, including two grandsons. The sequence in which these deaths are presented, without commentary, is an exercise in pathos enhanced through restraint.

Although Karen doesn’t directly speak to these tragic events in Char’s life, she shows Char reflecting on them with an almost brutal honesty: “I do feel that I’ve had so many people die that it’s kind of hard to get attached—I don’t say that, because I am attached to all my friends and family, but…” But that past permeates their present, and will continue to shape their future. This vision of ongoing influence is represented visually in the video’s final moments. The documentary concludes with Char explaining that the necklace meant a lot to her once she was “old enough to understand” its significance. The photo of Char with her parents that opened the video cross-fades into a shot of their extended, present-tense family: “This serves as a transition between my grandmother looking at her past and then looking to our future, which is really what the film is ultimately asking viewers to do” (reflection). This final message is nailed home as Char concludes with the hope that “the older they get, the more they will maybe understand me.” With this last word, the screen fades to black. Char’s closing sentiment serves as the culmination of Karen’s rhetorical construction.

7.4.2.3 Constructing an Emotional Appeal

The seeming simplicity of “The Necklace” depends upon a relatively elaborate structure designed around its thematic center, the literal and metaphoric legacy. Discussion of the necklace frames the life story within: the video opens with its history
and ends with its role in the present. In between, this symbolic “lucky star” serves as foil to Char’s unlucky life. As Char and Karen collaboratively recount family tragedies, the audience glimpses hints of their reverberations. Char thoughtfully reflects upon her history of “bad luck” and its complicated consequences for her relationships and personality. She explains, “I’ve experienced more good times than bad; it’s just that those bad times keep coming on,” leaving her with a certain detachment and deep sadness. Char reflects that she survived simply because “I had to do things… You can give up, or you can go on. And I just never could give up.” Karen didn’t choose to end on this availably neat moment, though. These layered narratives—Char’s and Karen’s—offer multiple messages to the audience. The moral of Char’s story is different from, but included in, Karen’s, which implies not only that understanding one’s history is important to understanding oneself, but also that one can best/only understand another by attending to their stories. By guiding her audience smoothly through her own listening and learning, Karen offers a model of the ethical author and/as audience.

7.4.5 Critical Framing: Documenting Another’s Life for One’s Own Purpose

The best director award bestowed upon Karen acknowledged her successful negotiating of some very slippery territory and demonstrated her classmates’ awareness of the ethical care, skillful restraint, and attention to detail that made this documentary a success. “The Necklace” tackled the two most significant challenges identified by students in composing autobiographical documentaries: First, Karen took it upon herself to compose a representation of another’s life, with all of the ethical complexities that move entails. And second, she did so with an agenda—but carefully. By enlisting the
audience’s identification with her perspective, she invited them to shift this lens onto their own lives:

I hope that through the use of broader ideas and challenges to audiences, people get more than just a sob story out my grandmother’s life story. I hope that they are compelled to take a closer look at their parents and grandparents because these people’s pasts are vital to us understanding who they are today. (reflection)

This video documents Karen’s attempts to broaden and deepen that understanding of “my Grandma”—and therefore herself—by listening to, and representing for others, Char’s story of a lifetime of loss and grief. As the video moves toward the conclusion, Karen’s written narration becomes plural, connecting her relationship with Char to her generation—those in her family but also, but extension, the audience. The pathetic appeal of a grandmother longing for a time when her grandchildren are mature and thoughtful enough to understand her encourages the audience to strive toward that understanding themselves, to follow Karen’s appealing lead.

The affordances of video enabled Karen to enter highly emotional waters without drowning her audience in pathos. Had she tried to verbalize the feelings evoked through the visual narration, Karen noted, she would have had difficulty avoiding trite expressions that would bore or alienate an audience, especially a young crowd. In her reflection, Karen notes her continuing concern over the heavy pathos. Ultimately, though, that was the truth she felt compelled to remain faithful to: “I wrestled with this for a while until I finally decided that I didn’t want to change it. Yes, my film was emotional, but it is an emotional reality for my Grandmother and for our family” (reflection). That emotional realism—along with the deliberately simple grace of the presentation—
resulted in a stunned silence during our final screening, followed by several comments about teary eyes.

Karen herself was amazed at the power of the final product, but even more so by what she discovered in the process:

I learned a lot about using digital media, like iMovie, through making *The Necklace* but to be honest, that’s not really what I’m taking away from this project. What I know that I’m going to use in the future is [what] I learned about composing a piece of work that affects people—making something that compels people to think about things differently. I think that people forget that their thoughts are truly unique to them and therefore, some mundane idea to you can be illuminating for another person. But you need to know how to compose something using effective rhetorical strategies to change anything. (reflection)

Like Jim, Karen’s prevailing insight from composing an autobiographical documentary was that rhetoric is prevalent and powerful—and that their experiences studying and composing these texts had prepared them to be more effective communicators in various contexts. Karen’s conscientious efforts to offer her grandmother an empathetic audience, and to represent her ethically, reflected her understanding of the responsibilities that attend communication. Meanwhile, her careful, subtle presentation of her argument to a potentially resistant audience demonstrated Karen’s rhetorical acumen, which included faith in an audience’s interpretive abilities.

8. Conclusion

As I hope this chapter has demonstrated, students’ experiences working with autobiographical documentary were both similar to and different from those of the students working with graphic memoir in “Illustrating Lives.” The overlaps, in large part, have to do with the results emphasized in the conclusion to Chapter 2: by critically
examining multimodal narrative, students came to a new appreciation of the subtleties of rhetoric as well as a recognition of the ways in which composition courses can contribute to the kinds of literacy learning students deem essential to their present engagement and future success. Rather than repeat these claims here, I wish to turn towards the second of my focusing follow-up questions: *What can composition teachers take away from this rhetorical approach to narrative?* Of course, this question cannot be answered without reference to students’ learning, but here I focus more on what we want students to learn than what they claim as central priorities. (When things go well, these aims are compatible and complementary.) As a partial, preliminary answer to such a broad question, let’s focus on two pedagogical goals that, I suggest, narrative rhetoric can help composition instructors accomplish: rhetorical consciousness and ethical communication. After this optimistic interlude, I turn back to the limitations of the approach documented in this chapter for achieving the goal of public engagement.

### 8.1 Teaching Rhetorical Consciousness through Narrative Rhetoric

Perhaps the key learning outcome achieved by this course was the realization that rhetoric is a factor of relationships. Studying narrative seems to have attuned students to the sets of relations identified by C.H. Knoblauch (1985) as essential to rhetorical studies: “[the] relation between language and the mind, the relation between language and the world, the relation between discourse and knowledge, the heuristic and communicative functions of verbal expression, the roles of situation and audience in shaping utterance, the social and ethical aspects of discourse” (p. 27). Updating and expanding these relations to include those among multiple modes and media, autobiographical documentary takes advantage of students’ extracurricular interests and critical abilities.
The evidence presented in this chapter indicates that the process of analyzing and producing autobiographical documentary can prompt students toward such epistemological and rhetorical insights about themselves and/in various contexts. The combination of genres pushed students’ comfortable, conventional division of subjectivity and objectivity towards a social epistemic view of rhetoric. The hybrid genre that results seems to offer critical pedagogues a vehicle for instilling consciousness of one’s own and others’ necessarily situated, partial perspective on the world. In students’ view, the genre of documentary seems to have trumped assumptions about autobiography; as an adjective, autobiographical became a mode, a way of approaching the apprehension and representation of reality.

A key insight followed: the idea of multifaceted “reality” validated situated perspectives and therefore authorized students’ contributions to larger conversations. But such authority cannot be absolute: one person’s or community’s truth need not (or should not) exclude another’s. By examining the rhetoric of autobiographical documentaries, students considered the possibility of persuasion based not on proving an opponent wrong but on promoting dialogue about important issues. This shift in their definition of rhetoric came as a relief to many, in particular because they expressed such distaste for the confrontational approach performed by Michael Moore and dominant in mainstream media and political discourses. The partial truths offered by their experiences did not seem to require arguing against anyone, but rather participating with their audiences in constructing meaning. In sharing their own stories, students develop heightened consciousness about what it means to listen rhetorically to the lives of others—and to attend actively to the subjective realities that shape and reflect those representations. This
brand of rhetorical awareness lends itself to a critical perspective but is also compatible with an ethical orientation toward communication.

8.2 Teaching Ethical Communication through Narrative Rhetoric

The hybrid genre of autobiographical documentary appears well suited to an examination of the mutual responsibilities shared by authors and audiences. Because autobiography and documentary both revolve around the complexities and consequences of representation, their combination illuminates the interplay of rhetoric and ethics. In addition to questions about whether ends justify means, autobiographical documentary drew students’ attention to more subtle negotiations of responsibility. Whereas autobiographical genres like memoir seem to place emphasis on the rights of authors to represent themselves and their perspectives, and the audience’s attendant responsibility to enter the authorial audience, documentary puts the burden of responsibility more firmly on the author. The right to fair treatment seems to tip toward the subjects and audiences, who nevertheless retain the responsibility for critical engagement and self-protection. And so even as the autobiographical element elicits the audience’s conscientious listening, the documentary aspect demands their critical attention. Students’ final videos reflect a growing understanding that a fair or accurate representation, even of oneself, depends upon engaging a multiplicity of voices and plural perspectives. Embedding others’ voices and offering partial views becomes an exercise in responsible research and ethos-building but also the most likely way to create a reasonable approximation of reality. These conversations, which permeate documentary studies and dominated students’ concerns as critics and composers, resulted in a fine-tuned attention to the ethical stakes at the heart of rhetoric. The extensive treatment of the ethics of
representation in documentary filmmaking would seem compatible with, even essential to, a digital storytelling movement premised upon empowered agency. Such productive connections would be well served, I suggest, by a rhetorical approach to personal narrative and an orientation towards the audience that holds potential for genuine influence in public discourse.

8.3 Local Publics & Limitations

Students’ rhetorical designs here were limited in scope by their determination of their target audiences. A flashback will help illustrate: As students began gathering resources for on their documentary projects, our discussions of intellectual property took a sharp turn when it became apparent that use of their own digital libraries did not fall under fair use. This was a point of major resistance and even anger—at the arbitrary, slippery legal restrictions of copyright law, but also at me for imposing those restrictions within the classroom. In response to strenuous objections that many of their inspirations were related to music and that realizing their visions seemed impossible with only public domain and shared resources, I offered a compromise: If students could present sound, informed arguments against adhering to musical copyright, I would reconsider this constraint. We staged a debate in class, in which groups of students argued for and against allowing the use of copyrighted music, and then switched teams. Various points were raised, but the turning point came with the overwhelming agreement that in this case, issues of legality (and even ethics) didn’t seem pertinent because students didn’t plan to “publish” their pieces beyond their chosen audiences: their local communities of

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60 Earlier in the term, I had offered extra credit for students who attended a campus screening of *RIP! A Remix Manifesto* (Gaylor, 2008), of which several took advantage. Their explanations were a crucial addition to this debate.
classmates, friends, and families. According to this logic, students claimed exemption from publication standards that would hamper their relationships with their actual audiences. They voted in favor of allowing copyrighted music, a decision that I respected.

This exhaustive discussion of audience during the debates over copyright confirmed, but didn’t seem to have caused, students’ decisions about circulating their videos. And so when the issue of copyright made them choose between going public and creating the most effective piece for their public, most students didn’t hesitate. This tendency to compose to an audience so similar to themselves may perhaps indicate a lack of rhetorical reach, but it’s also a reasonable extension of the idea that we can best write what we know. Moreover, this selection of public takes on new weight in light of students’ responses to the course’s preliminary survey about rhetoric. When asked, “What kinds of texts do you think have the power to influence the way people (like you) think and/or act?” students overwhelmingly identified “personal experiences” and “conversations with family and friends” (survey). With this in mind, it’s possible to understand their chosen narrative occasions as being well suited to the spheres of influence in which they see themselves as participating. This, too, is rhetorical consciousness.

Nevertheless, students’ decisions to orient their video compositions towards local audiences indicate two constraints of this approach. First, assuming an audience so like the self can discourage authors from critically attending to the situated nature of their own meaning-making, the unexamined warrants that can prevent personal or social change. Second, students’ assessment of the rhetorical potential of their autobiographical narratives can reinforce a limited sense of their potential contributions to larger
conversations. The decision to target local publics, the class community and their friends and family, resists simple binaries between private and public audiences in favor of a realistic, grounded understanding of their current spheres of influence—but it also reflects students’ propensity to remain within those (relatively) safe spheres. In this light, the potential of autobiographical documentary to encourage students’ participation in public discourse remains in question. I suspect that students’ reticence results from two related concerns: a lack of exigency resulting from a lack of focus. A key preliminary step to addressing a public is simply finding (or creating) it—a secondary step might be discovering/developing a common issue to engage. In the next chapter, I consider the potential of a particular genre of autobiography, the literacy narrative, for offering students a space and purpose for publication.
1.1 Introduction

Throughout the previous chapters, the subject of literacy has been an essential subtext, guiding pedagogical goals and informing class conversations. In this case study, literacy comes to the fore as I finally engage the most prominent type of autobiography in contemporary composition studies: the literacy narrative. Most discussions of literacy narratives assume certain generic conventions. Like a memoir, a literacy narrative is typically understood (by teachers and researchers) as a first-person retrospective account of a particular event or relationship, but with a particular focus on literacy learning or teaching. By extension, as I demonstrate in the next section, pedagogical uses of literacy narratives tend to replicate the priorities of personal narrative assignments, namely, self-exploration, identity construction, and critical awareness about the contextual forces at play in everyday life. I suggest literacy narratives can do more for composition studies. Much as this dissertation aims to revise conventional approaches to personal writing, this chapter suggests the value of revising our own and students’—or, more to the point, allowing students to revise our—understanding of literacy narratives to emphasize their rhetorical potential and to situate their contributions within public discourses. To that end, the course documented here asked students to explore narratives about literacy, including but not limited to autobiographical accounts, before designing their own
contribution to the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (DALN).

As this chapter demonstrates, a rhetorical approach to literacy narratives offers composition pedagogy an opportunity to foster students’ metaliteracy, a heightened awareness of and engagement in their own (and others’) learning, as well as the rhetorical resources to translate that awareness into action. Approaching narrative through literacy, and vice versa, enabled students to investigate dominant discourses from new angles and to reconsider their own experiences in light of these conversations. Moreover, situating their literacy narratives in a public space extended students’ rhetorical reach and raised the stakes on the personal narrative assignment. The DALN setting prompted students to use their experiences as authorization to promote dialogue about issues that matter to diverse stakeholders, including other learners as well as educators and administrators. In this light, students’ public-oriented video compositions suggest the value of such projects for fostering participation and furthering the public turn in composition studies. In an interesting twist, though, student’s literacy narratives often exhibited low narrativity, prioritizing argument over story, and minimal explicit autobiography, drawing from without speaking to their personal stakes in these issues. These unexpected results raise productive questions about the relationship between narrative genres and narrative as a rhetorical mode, questions that I turn to in my concluding discussion of the pedagogical and public potential of narrative designs.

1.2 Chapter Overview

Again, this chapter follows the organizational scheme developed in the previous two: The next section offers a Contextualization of my approach within a brief history of literacy narratives in composition pedagogy, highlighting the recent influences from new
literacy studies that continue to shape how scholars compose, study, and teach literacy narratives. These approaches offer incentives for teachers and researchers to pursue literacy narratives in composition pedagogy, but they also suggest certain cautions about implementation and emphasis. This literature review leads to section 3’s description of my own experiment with literacy narratives in a particular Course Design. After this overview, the Situated Practice section offers a look at students’ points of entry in this course in terms of their personal histories with and concerns about the future of literacy. In section 5, I delineate the major concepts and definitions that became the class’s shared vocabulary for examining and composing representations of literacy in the digital age.

The Critical Framing section summarizes my analysis of students’ conversations about literacy, synthesizing these findings into three core concerns: investment and concerns, learning and playing, and participation and persuasion. These themes served to frame students’ own multimodal narrative compositions, contributing to the generation of resources for their final video literacy narratives for the DALN. Section 7, Transformed Practice, features four student videos that I have selected to represent the rhetorical literacy narratives developed by the class community. I analyze each video according to the narrative communication model and critical framing in order to assess the messages students sent as well as the rhetorical principles that underlay their composing strategies. Their work, I suggest, points to the collective invention of a genre of personally-informed, public-oriented investigations of literacy that prioritizes interaction and dialogue over agonistic argumentation. The concluding section considers the implications of these findings for composition studies as a discipline, particularly the
public turn, to suggest ways that we might encourage students’ participation in critical conversations about teaching, learning, and storytelling.

2. Contextualization

2.1 Literacy Narratives in Composition Studies

This chapter draws upon extensive work on literacy narratives (variously defined) in composition and English studies as well as contributions from new literacy studies on narrative accounts of literacy learning. The use of literacy narratives in composition studies aligns roughly with personal narrative more generally, an overlap attributable to the conventional designation of literacy narratives as autobiographical in nature, recounting authors’ memories of their own experiences. In early work on the subject, however, literacy narratives were defined more broadly and often drawn from literary and historical contexts. Peter Mortensen and Janet Carey Eldred’s (1992) touchstone article, “Reading Literacy Narratives,” defines literacy narratives as those texts that “foreground issues of language acquisition and literacy,” both oral and verbal, and uses George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion* as an example (p. 513). To some degree, this emphasis on *literary* literacy narratives implied the rhetorical stakes of these accounts, their constructed nature and cultural influence. As the article’s title attests, however, Eldred and Mortensen’s (1992) use of literacy narratives positioned students as audiences and thereby excluded them, to some degree, from the role of author. As J. Scott Blake (1997) and Caleb Corkery (2005) warn, relying on exemplars like as Frederick Douglass’s autobiography or scholars’ memoirs may backfire if students cannot see themselves in these models. Moreover, exclusive attention to “published, ‘professional’ literacy narratives is partly conservative in that it stabilizes the ideas and stories of a few select
authors, conserving and preserving their versions of literacy and literacy development. The danger in this position is its potential to marginalize student writing” (Blake, 1997, p.). These arguments point toward the value of having students write their own narratives along with (or instead of) reading others’.

This move towards eliciting students’ own literacy narratives has been bolstered by the rising profile of narrative research and its implications for pedagogy. Mary Soliday (1994) encourages teachers to engage accounts of everyday literacy, highlighting their role as “sites of self-translation where writers can articulate the meanings and the consequences of their passages between language worlds” (p. 511). She suggests that composing in this genre can offer students a sense of personal agency and awareness of the tensions that arise as they move back and forth among literacy contexts and modes. Although self-representation is briefly referenced, Soliday’s central argument is that students’ literacy narratives can “enhance their personal success as writers in the university” and “deepen their teachers’ understanding of difference” (1994, p. 522).

Likewise, Shirley Rose’s (1990) Burkean analysis of student literacy narratives focuses on teachers’ understanding of their students experiences with and attitudes towards literacy: “[T]hey offered key insights into culturally shared assumptions about the nature of literacy” (p. 245). In such accounts, literacy narratives benefit teachers by offering increased understanding of students’ literacy background and beliefs. As salutary as these results may be, the focus on teachers as the primary audience may prevent us and students from considering exigencies beyond the classroom.

Because literacy narratives position students as experts in their own literacy development and agents in future learning, they have played a significant role in student-
centered pedagogies (e.g., Scott, 1997; Bishop, 2000; Williams, 2003; DeRosa, n.d.), particularly in relation to basic/developmental writing and second language learning (Sandman & Weiser, 1993; Anokye, 1994). In these contexts, literacy narratives are praised for their ability to foster self-reflection and confidence. Melanie Kill (2006) uses literacy narratives as “a low-stakes, introductory piece of writing” (p. 223); Caleb Corkery (2005) highlights their potential for confidence-building. This does not mean their approaches are uncritical, however. As Corkery points out, examining literacy development can help students become more aware of the complex issues surrounding literacy at home, at school, in their communities, in broader social contexts. By extension, these examinations prompt students to consider dynamics of power, access, and agency that influence literacy learning within and beyond institutional education. This prioritization of awareness and associated feelings of agency has dominated the pedagogical use of literacy narratives, validating their use but also limiting their utility. Much like narrative writing in general, literacy narratives have been underexamined as rhetorical compositions with audiences and purposes beyond the class community.61

2.2 The Influence of New Literacy Studies

The prevailing treatments of literacy narratives in composition studies have been strongly influenced by connections to new literacy studies. As defined by Brian Street (1995, 2003), James Paul Gee (1990, 2000), and others, new literacy studies is marked by a shift from autonomous to ideological models of literacy as a diverse set of shifting, situated practices shaped by contextual forces (Street, 1984). Researchers like Deborah

61 Despite these pedagogical trends, scholars’ recognition of the rhetorical power of literacy narratives is evident in scholarly works that personalize and publicize the complex contextual forces of literacy. For a small sample, see Lu, 1987; Gilyard, 1991; Villanueva, 1993; Rose, 1999; Richardson, 2002; and Pandey, 2006.
Brandt (2001) and John Duffy (2007) have responded with productive examinations of the relationships among power, language, and literacy in everyday lives. The overlap with and influence of such work on composition studies is significant, and the lines between are often blurry. Qualitative research based upon individual and collective accounts of literacy development abounds, contributing to larger conversations about professional and pedagogical priorities. With an eye towards improving formal education, Cynthia Selfe and Gail Hawisher (2004) assess the cultural ecologies that shape multiple subjects’ technological literacies. Within the classroom, Jonathan Alexander (2008) draws upon new literacy studies to examine students’ developing understanding and accounts of sexual literacy in composition courses. On the public front, the recently-launched Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (DALN) invites new participants to join these discussions by contributing their own personal literacy narratives to a public space. I was privileged to participate in the DALN’s first few years and to witness the enthusiasm of researchers, teachers, and the participants they’ve recruited. These diverse stakeholders form a kind of micropublic within which, I suggest, students may find audiences and exigencies for their own situated examinations of literacy. The DALN’s potential—for scholars, students, and citizens—depends in part on a revision of literacy narratives as not just personal reflections to be decoded by experts but as rhetorical acts in their own right. One of the goals of this chapter is to do just that, with students’ help.

2.3 Toward Rhetorical Literacy Narratives

This brief history of the use of literacy narratives in composition offers valuable lessons for teachers: that models can be both a help and a hindrance; that self-reflection on past learning experiences—positive, negative or ambivalent—can influence students’
future relationship with education; that placing their lives in dialogue with others’, both within and outside of the classroom, can encourage critical cultural awareness; and that respecting extracurricular and alternative literacies can lead to insights and excitement in the classroom. Such work provides justification and impetus for my own research, which aims to expand literacy narratives’ rhetorical potential within composition courses and, perhaps more importantly, in public discourses. A genre recognized (primarily, if not solely) by teachers and researchers, literacy narratives are generally assumed to be more self-reflective than audience-oriented. This chapter advocates a move toward rhetorical literacy narratives that, like rhetorical narratives more generally, are consciously designed according “to the demands of the relationship between the specific audience to which it is addressed, the specific context in which it appears, and the specific gain toward which it strives” (Lucaites & Condit, 1985, p. 94). By inviting students to contribute their narratives to public discourse, I suggest, teachers can foster not only greater awareness of agency but also an active deployment of that agency in the service of critical research and generative dialogue, in public and with purpose.

3. Course Design

“Narrating Literacies” differed significantly from the courses documented in previous chapters in that the course was an introduction to digital media—not a requirement, nor writing-intensive. It therefore afforded quite a bit of flexibility in course design. My approach asked students to situate digital media within conversations about what it means to be literate in their current cultural moment; we further focused our attention by examining narrative representations of digital literacies, from Langdon Winner’s (1986/2003) critique of the use of “revolution” to describe digital media to RIP!
A Remix Manifesto’s (Gaylor, 2008) advocacy of remix culture. A literacy narrative, from this standpoint, became any narrative representation of literacy, not necessarily a personal memory. My decision to term such texts literacy narratives stemmed from a desire to investigate the transferability of the narrative communication model but also to prevent students from falling back on the conventions of personal narrative assignments. As previous chapters demonstrated, students’ past experiences composing narrative genres tend to constrain their perspective on what stories are worth telling and how. In this case, I attempted to circumvent this issue by expanding students’ view of what can count as a narrative. The autobiographical component was not lost, just reframed: students eventually composed literacy narratives based on their personal experiences, but those compositions were firmly situated within larger conversations about the rhetorical resources of narrative in public discourse.

Throughout the term, students analyzed alphabetic articles, photo essays, videos, social media sites, wiki pages, comics, etc. as they composed their own multimodal narrative texts. Students designed three major compositions—a blog, a visual argument, and a video literacy narrative—that were informed by common readings, class discussions, low-stakes exercises, and studio sessions. Each student developed and maintained his or her own blog throughout the term, using it as a space for reflection and interaction. The visual argument assignment asked students to propose and create a compelling treatment, either a comic or photo essay, of some aspect of literacy (broadly construed) in the digital age. Finally, after interviewing each other with the prompts provided by the DALN, students composed video literacy narratives as autobiographical

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62 See Appendix A for further details.
contributions to digital conversations about literacies in everyday life. Taken together, the
dialogic process of analysis and production shaped the conversation within which
students positioned themselves and their work.

4. Situated Practice

The students enrolled in this course offered a more diverse cross-section of OSU
students than I usually encounter in required composition courses: there were multiple
races and ethnicities, a couple of men in the military, some parents, two international
students, and many different majors. Although students therefore came to this class with
significant differences in terms of backgrounds, skills, and priorities, there was one
commonality that bears mentioning: They chose to be there, at least to some degree. This
particular course, unlike the previous examples, was an elective. It fulfilled a General
Education Curriculum requirement but was not yet required by any college or major.
Whether because it fit their schedule or they thought it might be fun, students also
enrolled as a result of some interest in digital media. For most, this interest did not stem
from expertise. Most of them had only ever looked at the front end of the Web, often
limited to user-friendly interfaces like Facebook or their smart phones. Few had ever
blogged or commented on a blog nor contributed to a commons like YouTube or a wiki
(survey). Whereas several declared themselves “geeks,” which seemed to be associated
with gaming culture and lust for technological toys, many more considered themselves
pretty typical users of digital media: they could use the tools but felt little confidence or
control.

In terms of pre-existing attitudes toward narrative communication, these students
resembled those from previous courses; rather than repeat those findings here, I refer the
reader to the *Situated Practice* sections in Chapters 2 and 3. Instead, I use the blog assignment to illustrate students’ situated practice, their pre-existing digital literacies as well as their autobiographical accounts of that relationship. Students’ first task, to create WordPress accounts and begin publishing their own blogs, began an engagement in online spaces that influenced students’ self-perceptions. As one wrote, “Never thought I would see the day where I would post my thoughts on the Internet for all the world to see, read, and comment on. Perhaps I am evolving into and becoming more digitally literate because of this little blog I have going” (A.T., tech autobio). This awareness of their own ongoing development was a key theme engaged in the first required post, a technology autobiography designed to encourage students “to reflect upon their own (and sometimes other people’s) experiences with technology, which leads them to think critically about technology” (Kitalong, Bridgeford, Moore, & Selfe, 2003, p. 219). In a lot of ways, students’ responses indicated that they were already thinking critically about technology and ready to apply their personal observations and experiences toward broader inquiries.

Considering their personal histories with technology, students frequently praised their first tech toys—the family computer, Nintendo, a karaoke machine—and connected that sense of play to their current relationship with literacy learning. One student traced his love of gadgets back to a childhood gift of Robotix: “That was the first of many afternoons I spent creating small motorized monstrosities, and loving every minute” (W.C., tech autobio). Others drew connections between their literacy practices and their families: parents restricted television time; sisters brought home lessons from computer class; cousins handed down their old equipment. For many students, computers factored heavily into formal education: “Everything we did could somehow be related to the
computer” (E.R., tech autobio). Not all of these experiences left a positive impression. One student told of being “forced” to use a right-handed mouse in kindergarten despite being left-handed and remembered being “quite bitter about it” (A.M., tech autobio). Another noted that computers in school were used only “to type papers” but “at home was a different story”: once he discovered he could make music, “the rest of my teenage years” were spent in front of a computer “trying to compile new sounds and develop my style” (J.D., tech autobio). Such distinctions between self-sponsored learning and formal education presaged the critical framing to come.

Similarly, these posts often evidenced students’ ambivalence about the role of technology in their lives, noting the exciting changes while considering their implications: “Things have evolved so quickly and to think of what could come around in the future, one can only dream of the possibilities…What’s next? One thing is for certain, it will have people more and more dependent on the technology” (H.D., tech autobio). This dependency was a point of concern: “I love that I have a plethora of information and resources at my fingertips, but I hate how much I depend on it” (Z.R., tech autobio); “I feel like they control me, not me controlling them” (A.M., tech autobio). Many students echoed this love/hate relationship with technology, enjoying the convenience and pleasure it affords while advocating circumspection: “Certainly, life is much easier when you have all kinds of awesome gadgets in your life. However, we should become wary when we begin to think of our lives as much better because we have easy-to-use gadgets” (F.J., tech autobio). Nor was technology always considered easy. Some students suggested they would have to work hard to keep up with literacy demands that seem to increase daily: “There is still a lot more we will learn as technology improves, and a lot
more we will also need to analyze and be careful of” (D.D., tech autobio). With such personal awareness and critical concerns already in place, my job was simply to introduce concepts and readings that would encourage students to connect their personal experiences to broader contexts.

5. Overt Instruction

This section is especially challenging in this chapter because I seemed to do very little that could be termed overt instruction. Even those sessions in which I introduced concepts were largely discussion-based; I often simply asked students to offer and debate definitions and issues without providing a final conclusive answer. Perhaps my most authoritative move here was that very refusal of closure in favor of an acknowledgement that even experts have difficulty pinning down the nuances of literacy and rhetoric. To assist in students’ own scholarly negotiations, though, I offered the narrative communication model and literacy-specific scaffolding vocabulary that provided a common ground for the conversations that followed.

5.1 Layered Multiliteracies

In our first class session, I introduced the theme of digital literacy as the central focus of the course. Simply appending the adjective digital to literacy initiated the complications of literacy that would ensue over the course of the term. As a result, when I asked what it meant to be digitally literate, students began to suggest the variety of skills necessary to ‘read’ and ‘write’ in digital media. Their first gambits focused on technological know-how and eventually moved towards a consideration of the multiple media they encounter every day, online and off: images, music, numbers, languages, facial expressions etc. At this point I introduced the term multiliteracies to encompass
these intertwined abilities of encoding and decoding information in various modes and contexts. I merely gestured toward the social stakes of these definitions in this discussion, a subtext that permeated our subsequent conversations.

My definition of *multiliteracies* was deliberately open, suggesting to students that even experts are still trying to figure out how people learn and use the resources of communication. This uncertainty was confirmed by the first reading assignment, Barbara R. Jones-Kavalier and Suzanne L. Flannigan’s (2006) “Connecting the Digital Dots: Literacy of the 21st Century,” which validates students’ digital literacies, often in contrast to their teachers’. In our discussion, students appreciated this respect but also recognized the fallacy of assuming all young people confident and competent in the wide range of media that happen to be digital. Their responses indicated the dual recognition that literacy is more than just reading and writing and that there’s no neat line dividing literacy and illiteracy in any given mode.

During this discussion (on the second day of class), I offered Stuart Selber’s (2004) three-part scheme of functional, rhetorical, and critical literacies to help solidify students’ intuitive sense that literacy is not an either/or classification. We defined *functional literacy* as the minimum abilities necessary to function in everyday personal and professional settings: reading and completing employment applications, knowing enough math knowledge to manage one’s finances, interpreting visual signs for safety and convenience. The next level discussed was *rhetorical literacy*, the ability to interpret texts with a clear view of authors’ goals and strategies and to compose one’s own effective texts. In many ways, students discovered that they already possessed many of the analytic insights that fit under the heading of rhetoric. When I provided the rhetorical model of
communication, they were ready to transfer this analytic approach across media. Finally, we defined *critical literacy* as a stance of productive critique, a questioning awareness of the complex forces—political, economic, social, cultural—at play in local and global affairs. The instinctive skepticism students had demonstrated in the first few days, which they found supported and challenged in the readings and discussions, reassured them that critical literacy was not out of reach and that its development is not, in fact, a simple progression from functional to rhetorical to critical. It may be possible to have an informed, analytic understanding of the dynamics of power and control without certain literacy skills, but it is not, I suggested, possible to contribute to those dynamics without a functional and rhetorical foundation.

5.2 Narrative Communication Model

The thematic and technical attention to literacy in this course meant that narrative was not, at first, central to our course conversations. I explained that we would be attending to narrative representations of literacy as a way to narrow our focus to a manageable corpus, but first we approached rhetoric more broadly. As a result, I established the external frame of the communication model, focusing on the participatory dynamics and shared resources that shape all acts of communication before honing in on narrative in particular. (That is, I introduced the communication model during the second session but did not situate the narrative toolkit at its center until the third week of the course.) As in previous courses, students would use versions of this scheme to prompt analyses and generate strategies for composing (see figure 4.1). A significant departure in this course, as explained in the section on *Course Design*, was that our discussions did not focus exclusively on autobiographical variations but considered a range of narrative
representations. This broad conception of literacy narrative encouraged students to consider narrative as a mode of communication that cuts across genre and medium. It also meant that we used the narrative communication model to examine rhetoric in general rather than in a particular genre.

![Narrative Communication Model](image)

**Figure 4.1: Narrative communication model**

### 5.3 Narrative Inquiry

The language of narrative inquiry did not arise explicitly until even later in the term, as we began to discuss students’ final video compositions in earnest. At this point I identified the narrative turn as an interdisciplinary conversation about the myriad workings of narrative—in law, psychology, medicine, etc.—and narrative inquiry as the study of how people make meaning of their lives, and communicate that meaning, through storytelling. I asked students to browse the DALN site on their own and offered
two contextualizing readings: John Szwed’s “The Ethnography of Literacy,” which calls for contextualized examinations of “the social meanings of literacy” (1981/2001, p. 422), and an early draft of Cynthia Selfe’s (forthcoming) chapter about the DALN that delineates multiple overlapping purposes literacy narratives can serve for their authors and audiences. These readings invited students to adopt the position of literacy researchers, a move reinforced when Professor Selfe visited our class to tell students a little bit about why she started the DALN and share some of her favorite contributions. As I will discuss in section 7, students found themselves enlisted, and therefore invested, as collaborators in the in-progress DALN project and narrative inquiry more generally. This research agenda would inform students’ rhetorical goals as they composed their own video literacy narratives.

6. Critical Framing

With this conceptual scaffolding in place (or at least in process), students embarked on overlapping, mutually informed analysis and production of digital media narratives and/or narratives about digital media. Prompted by course ‘readings’ like Wikipedia’s “Digital Divide” entry, Elizabeth Losh’s (2009) “Virtual Crowds and Participatory Politics,” and Eric Faden’s (2007) “A Fair(y) Use Tale,” students engaged in spirited conversations about access, democracy, copyright, and education while composing their own contributions to these discourses. In this section I offer a critical frame extrapolated from students’ in-class discussions, blog posts and comments, and visual arguments. I have organized these analytic findings according to three overlapping issues: investment and concerns, learning and playing, and participation and persuasion.
Each of these themes is elaborated upon in the pages that follow, combining to create the critical frame within which students eventually positioned their final literacy narratives.

6.1 Investment & Concerns: Taking Literacy Personally

In certain ways, this class was less directly engaged with narrative than those documented in previous chapters. And yet it was also the course in which students most extensively and directly brought their own experiences and beliefs to bear on class discussions by drawing from family memories, chats with roommates, daily interactions, and popular culture. This experiential grounding was prompted in part by the technology autobiography and encouraged by the ongoing blog assignment. But more deeply, I think, it came from students’ recognition of the real-life stakes of these conversations; with literacy redefined as activities they do everyday, their investment in those issues became pretty clear. This was especially true in students’ blogs, where they tended to share personal details like conversations with friends, stress about work, the challenges of combining fatherhood and homework, or memories of favorite video games. In this section I consider just two of the themes that emerged throughout students’ individual and collective explorations of literacy in everyday lives: First, digital media has serious (and often troubling) implications for personal communication and social dynamics, and second, technological advances have resulted in increased pressure for ever-expanding functional, rhetorical, and critical literacy skills. Students’ discussions of these issues proceeded, like my analysis, from the ground up; I organize them here from the personal outward.
6.1.1 Exciting Progress and Unnerving Implications

As indicated in Situated Practice, students arrived in this course with mixed views on digital media. Even as they praised the fun and convenience afforded by new media, many expressed strong reservations about the consequences of technology on their personal, economic, and social lives, with some agreeing that “while technology has provided so much positive in the world, it has created a lot of negative in mine” (A.T., blog, 1/25). Declarations of uncomfortable dependence on technology were commonplace and explicit: “I don’t leave my house without my cell phone in my right pocket and my iPod in my left. If I happen to forget either, I feel lost” (H.D., blog, 1/11). One consequence highlighted by several students is that they are rarely alone and quiet: “At some point, it almost feels like everyone being able to contact me at every instant is suffocating” (D.C., blog comment, 1/24). Moreover, the incessant ability to multitask and stay connected foreclosed the possibility of just turning off: “I mean, when was the last time you did nothing? Absolutely nothing? Just sat in a room and thought about things without doing 10 other things at once?” (S.Y., blog, 2/15). Few could respond to this challenge.

Often within the same breath that they wondered how people had managed before cell phones and the Web, many students decried the negative impact they had on personal relationships. Popular social media, especially Facebook, drew a lot of fire for wasting time and messing with minds: “Anyone else feel like facebook has invaded their lives? I do!” (S.Y., blog, 1/23). Students regularly pointed to the illusion of online connection, as with Twitter: “Followers DO NOT equal ‘Friends’ and ‘Friends’ DO NOT equal relationships” (W.C., blog, 1/19). The irony that the very social networks people use to
stay connected also allow them to avoid intimacy was a regular topic of discussion in class, on the blogs, and in compositions: “One of the reasons these were created was for us to become more connected with each other—and in a lot of ways, I think these things are an alienating technological advance” (M.L., blog, 1/12). Students noted that phones have become a crutch to “get out of awkward situations, e.g. You see someone you know approaching you that you do not want to talk with so you act like you get a call so you blow past them” (A.T., blog, 3/15). Similarly, “people commonly fake text when they feel insecure in a public place so they don’t feel alone. I know this because I have been guilty of doing it before!” (P.S., blog, 1/25). In an interesting trend, reflecting on their own memories made many students concerned about the generations coming after them: “I worry too about the future... I’m glad I got to experience an outdoorsy childhood and I hope that kids in the figure don’t get robbed of that by technology” (M.L., blog, 2/14). Extending these concerns, many suspected that “technology has hindered the general population’s ability to effectively communicate with each other” (Z.R., blog, 1/31). Such claims were often directly related to students’ sense of the lack of critical perspective with which mainstream consumers embrace technical advances.

6.1.2 Expanded Literacies and Increased Pressure

The pace of technological change, even within students’ own lifetimes, was another regular source of interest. Students frequently praised improved graphics and smart phones, but almost as often expressed frustration with seemingly relentless updates: “Can’t people just stay with one [social networking site] instead of moving to a new one over and over again?” (A.M., blog, 2/14). Many of students’ comments about the rapid rate of change included some anxiety about their ability to keep adapting: “I’m not sure
my budget or my brain can keep up with the flow of mainstream technology” (W.C., blog comment, 1/15). It wasn’t just that they felt the need to keep buying new things; they also expressed pressure to keep learning new skills to use these tools: “It is amazing to think how far our computer technology has come in 10 years and it is crazy to think about how much more information we are required to have collected in order to just function on a basic level at a computer nowadays” (A.M., blog, 1/18). One problem, as several identified, is that the standards of functional literacy are constantly changing: at this point, basic technological know-how has become a point of entry for most professional and social settings.

Moreover, the changes in communication media have not meant exchanging one mode for another but rather negotiating multiple modes, often simultaneously. One student warned, “As technology becomes more sophisticated people have to be sure they do not leave behind valuable skills to simply be able to navigate the internet, and poorly at that” (S.D., blog, 1/24). Another reported a friend’s half-joking declaration that one doesn’t need to know how to read now that computers can do it for us, along with her response: “[H]ow can you comprehend what internet sites say if you don’t know how to read? This is kind of scary to think this is what people are thinking” (H.T., blog, 1/24). Students recognized that each mode and level of literacy necessarily informs the others. To achieve and retain functional literacy is therefore an ever-more-daunting task, and students detected a common fallacy in “assuming that by supplying technology we’ve done our part in helping people become digitally literate” (D.C., blog, 2/1). This kind of recognition points to students’ adoption of an expansive definition of literacy, as well as their concern about a detected lack of attention to rhetorical and critical perspectives.
One problem students identified was simply the proliferation of information that can overwhelm audiences: “Most of what we listen to just kinda floats by us and we never take anything from it” (D.D., blog, 3/7). Students understood that “there is a lot of junk out there and you need to consider the source” (A.T., blog, 2/28). But less critical users are in trouble when “the village idiot has as much power and influence as the people who know what they are doing” (H.D., blog, 2/25). Part of the problem, as they’d noted previously, is a general lack of rhetorical consciousness among “a high percentage of the public who will believe what they are reading without thinking” (H.D., blog, 2/26). Flooded with messages and awash in media, public discourse becomes risky for the unprepared, who are likely to be taken advantage of, pushed aside, and/or misunderstood: “It seems more and more like those who do not understand technology are doomed to suffer at its hands. I can only wonder what the future will hold” (D.S., blog, 2/28). This ominous tone reflects students’ shared anxiety about the general lack of critical literacy they detected in themselves and contemporary American society in general.

6.2 Learning & Playing: Alternatives to Conventional Education

It will not come as a surprise that students’ personal investment in issues of literacy was particularly evident in their discussions of education. Or rather, I should say learning, because students tended to draw distinctions between institutional instruction and less conventional methods. As their technology autobiographies indicated, the students with positive relationships with technology often connected those to childhood play rather than schoolwork. This theme became prominent over the course of the term. As students assessed their own literacy learning in the past and within our class, they often expressed qualms about certain disconnects they detected between styles of
learning and methods of teaching. Again, these conversations were grounded in personal experience but helped students build connections between their lives and broader public concerns.

6.2.1 Critiquing Pedagogy

Students’ awareness of the high stakes of literacy placed a great deal of emphasis on their own learning processes. Unfortunately, some students declared, the “antiquated system” of formal education is not fully preparing them to meet these changes (W.C., blog, 2/25). Although most students had grown up using computers in school, they tended to downplay what they learned in those formal settings; many suggested an overemphasis on functional skills to the detriment of “critical thinking skills” (S.D., blog, 1/24). Even in college settings, they argued, most of their courses sacrificed learning to testing. As they reflected on their past learning and present capabilities, students often condemned pedagogical moves they deemed not just useless but alienating: rote memorization, rigid or arbitrary exercises, and isolation:

School sucks! We’ve come to that conclusion in class. There is a huge flaw in the way things are taught today. Sit down, shut up, temporarily memorize facts that have little or no bearing on your life, career track, social outlook or personal interest… Just hand me my smiley face sticker/report card/diploma/degree, so I’ll finally be allowed to pursue the things that matter to me. (W.C., blog, 2/25)

This frustration was a regular point of agreement. Nor did they let themselves off the hook: students admitted to slacking when bored or skipping a lecture if they could get notes and pass the exam anyway. But they tended to lay the blame at the feet of “selfish and lazy” teachers and, more broadly, the institutional and political priorities that dictate pedagogical conventions (M.L., blog, 2/28).
6.2.2 Enjoying Alternatives

By contrast, students’ positive memories of learning—usually outside of school settings—revealed the moves that do promote genuine learning: immersive experiences, relevant projects, and collaboration. Sometimes the connections were quite direct: “My addiction to video games is what made me think programming would be fun” (D.C., blog, 1/15). In more subtle ways, students who were more digitally literate than others modeled learning though messing around, figuring things out on their own, and searching out resources and answers when necessary. As one wryly advised, “the more things you break the more things you learn” (M.M., blog, 3/8). Students newly exploring digital tools were often surprised at their enjoyment of the process: “I had a ball playing with Photoshop in class. Being that I am not very good with computers it fascinated me that by playing around and even making a few mistakes resulted in something that I actually kind of liked!” (P.S., blog, 1/25). In a related vein, students praised unconventional sites of learning like YouTube:

Between the videos of cross-dressing little people and Steve-O wannabes, there is actual knowledge… It’s incredible just how much you can learn for free, while sitting at home in your underwear eating a bag of Cheetos… this buffet-style learning proves, people still want to learn. They want to teach each other and be taught by each other. (W.C., blog, 2/25)

In a similar way, many were amused by the fact that course readings included Wikipedia and video mash-ups, which turned out to be “memorable and useful” and therefore “effective learning tool[s]” (A.M., blog, 1/21; 1/30). Students’ examinations of literacy development led them to define it as ongoing process, which meant the real expert was constantly learning: “[T]hose who listen and are open to new ideas are the ones who will
get far when it comes to being digitally literate” (M.L., blog, 2/1). This emphasis on experimentation and play was reinforced by their enjoyment of this course’s reliance on those pedagogical strategies.

6.2.3 Developing Metaliteracies

Students’ final reflections on the course indicated the influence our informal studio class dynamics had on their views of education. “[T]he lessons we learned and the laughs we shared” confirmed the effectiveness of alternative classroom environments (D.D., blog comment, 3/15). Primary among these realizations was the simple one that they learned more by learning together: “We didn’t just meet for a little more than an hour and try to soak up information—we got help from each other, we reviewed each other’s work, we tried to teach each other” (D.C., blog, 3/15). As another student commented, “As I type this post, everyone in class is speaking with one another and having a good time. This how a class of students should be… At least in my eyes” (E.R., blog, 3/15). Such positive conclusions did not negate the challenges students encountered as they learned new composing strategies and platforms, but students came to view their frustrations as an inevitable, even beneficial, consequence of stepping “outside of my comfort zone” (A.M., blog, 3/14). The assignments became exercises in finding their way around digital media. Simply discovering the endless learning resources available helped students feel a sense of agency over their future literacy development: “This class has helped me take the first step towards this because not I have the most vital key to use and overcome the difficulties of any technology: EXPERIENCE” (P.S., blog, 3/15). The class dynamic helped students articulate something they realized that they already knew: that they learn best by doing. I offer these comments not as a testament to the quality of the
course but to highlight students’ metalearning within it. By subjecting their own literacies to critical analysis, they came to a clearer understanding of how they learn (or not), realizations that informed their decisions about the form and content of their rhetorical literacy narratives.

6.3 Participation & Persuasion: Negotiating Public Rhetorics

The ambivalence students felt towards the role of digital media in their personal lives and social contexts was also present in their attitudes about participating in digitized public spaces. For some students, the appeal of building online connections was strong:

I am simply in awe of the wonders that it brings. It allows someone like me to have an audience to present my thoughts to. It allows me to share my beliefs and my desires and my struggles, and my burdens, and it allows me to have support through this. It allows for widespread fellowship and connection to people who are going through things that you are. (H.D., blog, 1/25)

Such positive perspectives, however, were far from the norm—and they usually received cautionary responses: “I feel like you might want to be as wary as you are excited” (S.D., blog, 2/24). Such wariness might help explain why so few students had participated in online discourses previous to this course. Their conversations indicated a fairly common assessment of public discourses as negative and off-putting. In response, their own rhetorical strategies focused on more positive moves.

6.3.1 Avoiding Confrontation: Negative Consequences of Interactivity

In discussions about online interaction, students regularly referenced the preponderance of flaming (ad hominem commenting) and griefing (harassing online gamers) that deterred many from putting themselves in a vulnerable position. Even the fun of multiplayer online gaming was not considered worth putting up with the “smack
talk” that can take “the fun out of it” (E.R., blog, 2/20). One student told a story about a friend receiving harsh art critiques, noting that “the internet gives us the ability to be heard, but we must still be hardened enough to withstand critiques far crueler than anything you would get in person” (D.C., blog, 1/24). Turned off by this kind of behavior, students admitted they rarely, if ever, put themselves in the line of fire by blogging or commenting on others’ texts. In this way their experiences belied the rhetoric of Web 2.0 that promises democratization of power through user-generated content and shared culture. Whereas the concept of digital divide did not seem particularly relevant to most students’ lives, they found Henry Jenkins’ (2006) notion of a participation gap more convincing. Some suggested that their own (and others’) limited engagement in digital spaces resulted from the “erosion of social skills” caused by immersion in digital media: “If no one knows how to interact then no new form of interactivity is going to be useful” (S.D., blog comment, 1/18).

For others, this avoidance was more directly related to what they saw as the prevalent negative tenor of public discourse in general. As students dutifully negotiated their own audience roles and responsibilities, they pointed out the rarity of such conscientious communication. The argument style privileged in dominant discourses—confrontational, close-minded, and polarizing—was deemed counterproductive to the point of paralyzing:

[I]t’s always about winning, not about gaining insight from each other or actually solving a problem—it’s always about winning… I find that I learn a lot more and come out feeling productive when I have a conversation with someone in which we play off of each other’s ideas rather than yelling blindly back and forth at each other. and honestly, it’s a lot more fun! (M.L., blog, 1/29)
At least in some students’ experience, confrontation led to alienation and apathy, so agonistic rhetoric seemed ineffective as well as unethical. Indeed, some reported avoiding the news and politics entirely because they found themselves consistently “disgusted when ‘discussions’ are turned into debates” (P.S., blog comment, 2/1). By contrast, our own emphases on rhetorical listening and relationship-building offered students another model. As they designed their various narratives, they did so with these questions in mind: What rhetorical moves result in productive communication? How can one compose a text that encourages, rather than shuts down, genuine dialogue?

6.3.2 Designing Dialogue: Toward Conversational Rhetoric

Students’ regularly stated aversion, as audiences, to aggressive approaches led many to define their own rhetorical agendas in non-confrontational terms: “The purpose of my [visual] ‘argument’ is not to judge or take sides, just to speculate about the change in social values” (P.S., blog, 2/1). These moves reflect students’ repeated claim that audiences don’t want everything spelled out for them: “I am not trying to tell my audience what to think as much as I am provoking them to brainstorm and think about this matter for themselves” (M.M., blog, 1/30). In this, the affordances of multimodal communication became clear: “The power of the photo essay is in allowing the user to use their own eyes” with the “hope that those looking at my piece will be willing to study it at least a little bit” (D.C., blog, 2/1). Similarly, students often left deliberate openings—“Interpret these as you will” (D.D., blog, 3/7)—to indicate their faith in the audiences’ own abilities. They also relied heavily on juxtaposition as “an effective, yet subtle way” of letting the audience construct the argument for themselves (A.M., blog, 2/8). To promote this kind of productive exchange, students developed and tested on each other a
range of rhetorical moves, of which I offer just a few highlights to set the scene for their literacy narratives.

The blogs and visual arguments helped students generate strategies of visual and verbal narration that they would incorporate within their video compositions. Prominent among these was the careful use of pronouns to shape the dynamic between author and audience. Not surprisingly, students’ narration in their blogs depended heavily on the first person singular, offering an individual’s perspective. But they also used the plural “we” as a way to connect their experiences with others or to indicate a shared perspective among their generation: “Who knows where these games will take us in the future, but if our present is any indication of what we might expect, I believe we are in for new adventures that will spark our imaginations and drive us to do things we never though we could” (D.D., blog, 2/20). Students became somewhat self-conscious about this move; for example, one noted about movies about human cruelty: “If we didn’t enjoy being told how bad we are, we wouldn’t pay the $9 to watch… And by ‘we’ we mean humanity. Because it’s never really us personally who’s bad, is it?” (D.C., blog, 1/27). Along with collective narration, students encouraged audience engagement through direct address, particularly rhetorical questions that didn’t necessarily expect an answer: “Why is it the things we remember as being to earth-shakingly profound and incredibly exciting are barely passable when we revisit them years later?” (W.C., blog, 3/3). Others used questions as prompts for audience engagement, often in the form of a sudden disruption. For example, one student’s visual representation of technological advances seems to be celebratory until that flow is suddenly interrupted with the solitary word, “Right?” before a page that silently depicts the attendant e-waste of such progress (S.Y., visual arg).
Challenging, provocative, unanswerable, their messy questions acknowledged the mutual
curiosity and the confusion that must result from being immersed in the ever-shifting
dynamics of digital media. Many students exhibited this tendency to forego neat
conclusions in favor of open-ended prompts that ask the audience to continue thinking
about the issues after their reading/viewing experience was over.

By encouraging their audiences’ contributions to these discussions, students
managed to draw heavily from their own perspective without ignoring others’ situated
points of view. This strategic focalization is most apparent, for obvious reasons, in their
visual compositions. With limited verbal narration, students relied on visual effects to
indicate these shifting perspectives. In one, a cyberstalker’s point of view is dark and
distorted, offering the audience a scary look at themselves from the outside (A.L., visual
arg); in another, the distorted body images caused by media representations are made
(again, scarily) visible through Photoshopped variations (M.L., visual arg). This play with
insider and outsider vantage points is also evident when one student first presents the
audience with their typical view of television, only to take the camera behind the curtain
to raise questions about who’s controlling what we see (D.D., visual arg). Focalization
can also add an element of drama, as when a disembodied narrator’s voice finally comes
to rest in the last panel of a comic, sending the audience back to the beginning to reread
(D.C., visual arg). These experiments offered students a chance to test the rhetorical
effects of focalization, the key differences between looking at something or looking with
someone in terms of emotional investment. As they moved from still to moving images,
this attention to the interplay of voice and views helped students subtly direct audience
engagement.
7.1 Transformed Practice

7.1.1 Looking beyond the Local: The Occasion of the DALN

As we approached the final assignment of the term, students in this course seemed far less anxious than those in previous chapters for several reasons. First, the literacy narrative was not positioned as the culmination of their learning in the course, just another in a series of digital compositions. As a result, they already had more experience and therefore comfort with multimodal composing and felt less pressure placed on one major composition. In addition, the focus on literacy and the forum of the DALN seemed to ameliorate qualms about the tellability of their life experiences. The consequences of this contextualization were considerable. On one hand, the presence of a public beyond the class community upped the stakes on the assignment; on the other, the micropublic of the DALN provided a safe point of entry that validated the authority of their literate experiences. We discussed the literacy narrative project as a combination of narrative inquiry and digital rhetoric, a contribution to public knowledge based on their own experiences. As a result, although the assignment prompt described these narratives as autobiographical, students tended to conceive of literacy narratives more broadly than “stories about how—and in what circumstances—they read, write, and compose meaning, and how they learned to do so (or helped others learn)” (DALN, 2011). The sample texts analyzed below indicate students’ rather more expansive view of the genre of literacy narratives, in which the autobiographical elements are often subsumed to arguments that arise from self-study. Likewise, although students recognized the scholarly value of the DALN, most were more interested in its potential as a space for dialogue: “[A]lthough I’m not too appreciative of writing and digital literacy and all that
jazz, I think that hearing all the different stories and seeing all the diversity and how people can all come together and discuss certain issues and their personal experiences with them… it’s pretty sweet” (M.L., blog, 2/20). These negotiations and students’ resulting choices suggest their feelings of agency over the assignment and its stakes.

The recent launch of the DALN, my involvement in the project, and Professor Selfe’s visit to our class combined to create a rhetorical situation in which students would be playing a formative part. This insider position meant that they tended to position themselves as not just contributors but collaborators. Moreover, we discussed the likelihood that they would be among other students contributing for similar assignments, a recognition that helped expand their audiences beyond teachers and researchers. This acknowledgment of multiple audiences, and their decisions about which to target, influenced students’ subsequent choices in terms of style and purpose. Students’ rhetorical agendas tended to be conversational rather than confrontational: “I hope I can come up with something creative to, you know, add to discussion, say something productive… I just hope to continue to contribute to provoking thought from people and provoking discussion about some of these issues” (M.L., blog, 2/20). Likewise, students had reasonable expectations of their influence: “Of course, I don’t plan to change the world with this composition, but, it may help just a bit” (W.C., blog, 2/25). Some had hopes that sharing personal stories would encourage audiences to be “more understanding of each other, for we do not know what they have gone through to get to where they are today” (S.Y., blog, 2/27). The resulting contributions are a testament to students’ negotiations of the DALN’s purposes—and their own. Their different readings of this
narrative occasion reflect students’ growing confidence in their own literate skills and the persuasive compositions they facilitate.

7.1.2 Toward Personal, Public, and Rhetorical Literacy Narratives

Over the course of the term, students had generated a strategic toolkit to help them engage and persuade the public audiences of the DALN. To provide a sense of this narrative maneuvering, I have chosen four sample literacy narratives, organized according to their original framing groups from the course. Borrowing a pedagogical move from Scott Lloyd DeWitt, Professor of English and then-Director of OSU's Digital Media Project, I incorporated a loosely collaborative aspect to this final assignment: although each student composed his or her own video, these individual texts were presented within a common frame created by their group. This strategy offered the benefits of group projects—teamwork, negotiation, informal workshopping, and the support of a team—while maintaining each student’s control over their own work. In this case, I used an anonymous survey to generate several clusters of interest. Students assigned themselves four groups focused around themes of technological literacies; family, community, culture; sociocultural issues of digital media; and school and education. These selections cannot represent the diversity of students’ DALN contributions or of the experiences that prompted them. Taken together, however, these students’ literacy narratives demonstrate common rhetorical goals and strategies that resulted from course conversations about literacy, narrative, and rhetoric in public discourses.

My selection of these particular video compositions attempts to represent the broad spectrum of student responses to this assignment, which ranged from conventional
memoir-style reflections to seemingly impersonal arguments. Most students, of course, landed somewhere along the middle, developing literacy narratives that taught them about themselves and taught others through the lens of their own experience. The first pair, Jen and Lina, drew upon their personal histories with language learning to develop markedly different presentations of similar advice. These videos work to enlist the audience’s identification with the authors’ experiences and thereby share their earned insights about language studies that work and those that don’t. Jen’s and Lina’s subtextual critiques of dominant pedagogies are embedded within literacy narratives that offer audiences alternative paths for genuine language learning. In the second set, the authors also build upon their individual backgrounds to develop arguments about literacy, but Dave’s and Danny’s videos appear markedly less autobiographical in form and focus. Prioritizing rhetorical presentation of arguments about literacy over self-representation, these compositions elude and challenge the conventions of literacy narrative as defined by scholars and researchers. After providing analyses of the individual texts, I consider what they suggest about the potential of autobiographical investigations of literacy for fostering student involvement in public discourses and thereby furthering the public turn in composition studies.

7.2 Collection 1: Language is More than Just Words

This group originally came together over the subject of education but soon narrowed their collective focus further as they discovered that each was interested in exploring the concept of language and how different kinds of languages are learned and taught. Their collaboratively composed introductory sequence is itself worthy of attention: The title phrase, “language is more than just words,” appears over muted
images of conventional literacy tools (notebooks, pens, computers, instant messages) and a bland background track. After “words,” the music, colors, and movement speed up, becoming energetic and vibrant as images of people dancing, signing, talking, and taking pictures flip past. The effect is a transition from outdated, boring versions of literacy as a factor of technology towards a new, diverse array of literacy as a part of social and cultural life. This opening offers a hint of the approaches to language and literacy learning advocated within each. In a similar way, the literacy narratives that follow begin to suggest students’ expansive understanding of the genre of the rhetorical literacy narrative as a representation of individual experiences, past and present, designed to communicate implicit or explicit lessons for their audiences.

7.2.1 Jen’s “My Personal Experience”: A Classic Revitalized

“Learning a Language: My Personal Experience” follows the usual conventions of literacy narrative (and personal narrative) assignments: it offers a personal memory, recounted in the first person, that concludes with a moral—languages are best learned in cultural context. That insight arose organically from Jen’s personal learning history:

I started out in Spanish class, went through the classes, dropped out of Spanish because it was boring. Then when I went to Nicaragua, even for just ten days, I learned a lot and realized how cool it is to experience a different culture, and that the reason why I thought Spanish was boring was because I wasn’t experiencing or open to the idea that the languages is about a lot more than just the words… it also has to do with gestures, culture, facial expressions, etc. (proposal)

That experience helped Jen become competent as a Spanish speaker and, as her video explains, convinced of the value of learning new languages for cross-cultural communication and understanding. As her proposal suggests, Jen viewed this narrative as
a progressive trajectory with a clearly demarcated turning point, one she was excited to share—“And I think when you as the storyteller are engaged, so is your audience!” (proposal). To secure that engagement, Jen played with classic narrative moves to bring the story and its message to life for her audience of other second language learners.

7.2.1.1 Narration, Focalization, and Identification

As her expressed excitement indicates, the tellability of her story did not worry Jen, but she was concerned that her telling of that story be engaging. (Her distaste for boring teaching methods is readily apparent in the video.) Jen’s strategy was to revitalize traditional first person retrospective narration through unconventional layering. Casual Spanish and English voiceovers overlap with alphabetic text, but the translations are not word-for-word. The result is a kind of bilingual chatter, conversational and intimate, that ebbs and flows throughout the video and demands careful reading/listening. To grab and keep her audience’s attention, Jen represents herself as relatable character. As implied within the video, that author is a fairly typical learner: If she’s bored, she’s not interested, but when she’s motivated, she learns quickly and with pleasure. This contrast is highlighted in the video: in academic settings, Jen appears alone and looks disinterested and frustrated. In Nicaragua, by contrast, her personality emerges: surrounded by people and cultural context, Jen’s voice and face come to life. This vitality returns home with her, as the final grinning image makes clear. Throughout, the vantage point of this narrator is firmly in the present state of cheery bilingualism, looking back at challenges she has overcome and inviting the audience along for the trip.

Along with the voiceover’s explanation, Jen used music and visual to recreate her own shift in perspective: The opening shots, where she speaks of her three long, dull
years of Spanish classes, are drab and monotone, alternating between lists of words and Jen silently performing boredom. But as the story moves to Nicaragua, both her audio voice and visual representations come to life, narrating this turning point in multiple modes: The voiceover says, “Luckily, I went to Nicaragua, and that changed a lot of things for me,” as the journey is visually tracked on iMovie’s animated globe. The background sound switches from dull static to music that builds in intensity as her narration speaks of experiencing the culture of Nicaragua over images of local scenes and people. Whereas in the first half Jen is viewed from the outside, once she arrives in Nicaragua, her perspective brings the audience along for the trip, following the flight path with the country’s flag and scenery before focusing in on local scenes. Her voice continues to layer languages as these images illustrate her immersive experience and resulting insights about language, culture, and connection. In the final moments of the video, the oral and visual narrators unite to reveal the author: an image of Jen grinning at the camera while she speaks her concluding argument, in English, directly to her audience.

7.2.1.2 Constructing a Concluding Message

Jen’s narrative is linearly structured to match her story: there are two distinct sections divided by a clear turning point. This chronology determines the logic of the argument: She was bored and unhappy with conventional language instruction but animated and motivated by experiential, grounded learning. Jen’s conclusion unfolds logically with/as her story. The narrative is simple and chronological, leading neatly to Jen’s evaluation, directly stated: “Now I see now that learning a language is difficult unless you are surrounded by it.” More importantly, though, “Now I see the importance
of learning it: to break down barriers and to understand those who are different from me.”

This point is repeated in the clearly delineated conclusion. To mark that shift, the collection’s title, “Language is more than just words,” is repeated orally and visually during a page-curl transition (the only transition in the video) that brings Jen and the audience back home in time and language. Over an image of her smiling face, speaking only in English, Jen reiterates her point: “It’s so much easier to learn a language when you’re surrounded by it than just learning it on your own. You know, when you learn a new language, you get to break down the barriers between you and a person who speaks a different language.” This two-fold argument about how and why to learn a language emerges as an organic conclusion to Jen’s story, presented with a deliberately light touch.

7.2.1.3 Critical Framing: Making the Personal Persuasive

One of the more conventional literacy narratives composed in this class context, Jen’s is nevertheless notable for its creative flair. “My Personal Experience” invites the audience to share Jen’s journey towards a more positive relationship with the learning process, an experience that left her “much more driven and excited to learn and understand people who are different from me… I think it’s totally worth the hard work” (blog, 2/28). This personal history has implications for other audiences; it’s precisely because her story is so common that Jen is able to create identification with audiences, which she takes care to do long before presuming to share the lessons she learned though experience. These moves suggest that Jen imagined her audience as sympathetic to her boredom in and resistance to formal school settings. (She was not, it would appear, directing this narrative at teachers, though we can certainly take our own lessons from it.) With such an audience, it’s not surprising that Jen’s video composition is carefully
entertaining and conversational in tone. Jen offered her narrative with strategic humility: It’s just “my personal experience,” after all. But it’s also highly purposeful in communicating her resulting insights about literacy learning, culminating in its final message.

Jen’s subtle direct address to her audience as “you” in this final moment positions her as a peer, a fellow learner sharing insights. In this light, Jen’s target audience is not the DALN’s scholarly participants except insofar as they are still language learners. The audience addressed is apparently individual, a “you” who has the opportunity to connect with “a person” who speaks a different language. The final message seems to be one of reassurance for others who have shared her frustration. She offers her narrative to suggest a possible solution: immersive education may be superior in terms of functional literacy learning and also because it teaches people about culture and difference and connection. But she also avoids preaching or treating education as a burden. The final lines suggest that language learning is something positive one “gets to” do under the right circumstances. Jen gently but firmly offers her viewers advice about how to make literacy education rewarding and effective: get it out of the classroom, ground it in culture and community, and make it your own through everyday practice.

7.2.2 Lina’s “A New Approach to Literacy”: Multiple Persuasive Perspectives

Lina’s literacy narrative is similar to Jen’s in theme but rather different in style. Like Jen, she grounds her narrative in personal experience: “I was born in Algeria and the national language is Arabic but because I moved to the States at such a young age (5 months old) I never had the opportunity to read and write Arabic” (proposal). Although her parents’ bilingualism ensure that she could understand the language, she “had a lot of
difficulty holding a conversation”; even when she visited Algeria, her “lack of confidence and general shyness” prevented her from speaking much: “I spent the majority of the time with my sister talking in English” (proposal). After taking Arabic classes at Ohio State and learning “a lot about vocabulary and grammar,” she went back to Algeria without the “crutch” of her sister, where she made new friends and therefore “became more comfortable with the language in three weeks than I had been in a year and a half of going to Arabic classes every day” (proposal). This experience persuaded Lina of “how much easier it is learning a language through immersion than learning a language in a classroom setting,” particularly in terms of oral speech and the connections it facilitates (proposal). As her proposal suggests, Lina’s initial plan was self-oriented—“I am very excited to reflect on my experience and consider my growth of Arabic through this video project.” As she composed, however, Lina’s emphasis shifted from reflecting on her own learning to teaching the audience through her earned insights. In the final project, Lina did not recount her personal story to the audience. Instead, her experience fades into the background of a broader narrative in which, it seems, the audience becomes the protagonist.

Upon first viewing, it is difficult to locate the story in “A New Approach to Literacy,” which presents an accumulation of perspectives on the common theme of learning Arabic. There are plenty of characters, each in distinct settings, telling their own stories. The plot that connects these embedded voices becomes apparent only after repeated viewings: Lina (the character who appears in the final scene) seems to be gathering lessons from other Arabic language learners. A turning (or perhaps tipping) point is reached when a student from Syria points out that “the only way” to learn a
language is to immerse oneself in it. At this point there is an abrupt shift in action as the Ohio-based narrator, whose perspective the audience has been sharing, reveals herself using digital media to communicate with another young woman in Egypt. The story ends with these two friends in Arabic dialogue, concluding a progressive trajectory from frustration to accomplishment. In this narrative, digital media becomes a way of connecting language, cultural context, and personal relationships into organic, enjoyable learning. But that path is not linear or simple; nor are Lina’s narrative strategies.

7.2.2.1 Polyvocal Narration and De-centralization of Authority

Like the story, the narrator is elusive. The opening black-and-white clip, which shows a young student lamenting his difficulties learning, offers an introduction to the sympathetic and humorous implied author. After the alphabetic title (in English and Arabic), the audience is presented with a series of talking heads, interspersed with illustrative images, elaborating on the challenges of developing Arabic literacy. The author remains unseen but develops her own ethos by offering these diverse perspectives from students and instructors, drawn in part from the DALN’s collection. These assembled voices combine to narrate shared complaints about traditional language education. The accompanying Arabic music increases in volume and tempo to animate the concluding scene, an online conversation between Lina and her friend in Egypt. Even here, the author does not draw attention to herself; the moment passes quickly, leaving the audience to assemble the pieces of the deliberately fragmented narration. Only at the end does the audience realize that they’ve shared Lina’s vantage point throughout the video. The narrator, like the audience, is in front of a computer screen, navigating an alternative to the counterproductive pedagogies critiqued by her informants. This
narrative is therefore represented in the present tense. It’s not a once-upon-a-time kind of story but an ongoing process of learning how to learn.

7.2.2.2 Persuasion through Shared Focalization

Presented without voiceover narration, this video relies on other strategies to guide audience responses. The prologue provides a significant clue into the author’s rhetorical agenda, one that becomes even more important because of her subsequent reticence. The black-and-white video clip of an old-school classroom, characterized by an inflexible teacher and anxious students, establishes an underlying argument immediately: traditional education isn’t always all that conducive to actual learning. Certain pedagogical methods can lead students to conclude, like the young man here, “I can’t make any sense out of this. I might as well quit.” The memory of this opening clip will provide a foil for the concluding positive representation of extracurricular literacy learning. Following this scene, the title appears in both Arabic and English: “A New Approach to Literacy” promises an alternative to these methods and the feelings of failure, inadequacy, and resistance they engender in students.

After this bold opening move, the author retires from prominence, but Lina’s quiet control is evident in the selection of voices, the order of their presentation, and the resulting narrative structure. The privileged first speaker provides the foundational argument that most teaching methods emphasize reading by sounding out letters, resulting in only the illusion of literacy divorced from comprehension. This critique is echoed in a YouTube clip of an Arabic language teacher who argues that because comprehension should be the real goal, writing should only come after hearing, understanding, and speaking. The argument in favor of conversation and comprehension
is reinforced by the literacy narrative of a faculty member in Middle East Studies who recalls that she became invested in—“fired up about”—learning Arabic only after rejecting memorization in favor of cultural contextualization. The final informant, a student who has lived in Syria, moves these perspectives towards a logical conclusion: “If you really want to learn a language, you’ve got to go somewhere where they actually speak it, where you’ll be forced to talk to everyone, regardless of how bad your language is.” Taken together, this series of voices constructs a linear argument that makes up the bulk of the narrative.

But without the frame created by the introduction and conclusion, that argument would be dry. The structure of “A New Approach to Literacy” prioritizes the logical evidence but bookends it in persuasive everyday stories that grab and retain the audience’s active attention. The dramatic conclusion of the video, in which the author’s advice about that “new approach” is finally made apparent, lasts all of 8 seconds. After a series of talking heads, the narrative take a clear turn, cued by the “swap” transition and change to upbeat, energetic music. Using iMovie’s global map, the author pinpoints Columbus, Ohio as the starting point for a red line of travel that crosses the globe to Cairo, Egypt. The audience’s first assumption would be that this convention indicates a flight. But instead of physical travel, the distance has been traversed by digital media: a finder window pops up, an invisible hand selects iChat, and suddenly, finally, the author reveals herself, speaking Arabic in dialogue with a friend in Egypt. Blogs and Facebook pages alongside the chat windows characterize these women as digital literates, while their smiles and animation mark them as engaged, invested learners motivated by real
relationships. Then the author vanishes as quickly as she appeared, leaving the audience to figure it all out.

7.2.2.3 Critical Framing: Demanding and Rewarding Participation

Whereas Jen worked to make herself familiar and friendly, Lina approached identification from another angle—literally. This video plays with audience perspective, inviting the viewer to share Lina’s own process of discovery. The effect, at first, can be disorienting. The audience must simply go along for the ride until the final reveal, which casts a new light on what preceded it and requires another viewing to make sense of the whole. Lina’s rhetoric challenges her audience to work to get at her message; one viewing probably does not suffice. As she and fellow students discussed during studio sessions, this can be a risky maneuver: if audiences are turned off by their initial confusion, they won’t play along. So Lina took care with the progression of this narrative. Before introducing the ‘foreign’ element of Arabic, she engages audience empathy immediately through the comic-tragic prologue with which any learner can relate. Lina pulls her audience along slowly but steadily through the narrative, as she critiques outdated approaches to language learning, researches insiders’ views on better alternatives, and arrives at an innovative solution. By the time the audience reaches that surprise conclusion, they have experienced this narrative for themselves.

This recursive reading process demands the thoughtful attention of the audience and rewards that attention with a new solution to the very challenge raised by Jen’s literacy narrative: Immersion may be the best route to language learning, but it’s not always feasible. For audiences dealing with realities of logistics, Lina models another route: digital media. Although it implies a personal history through others’ accounts,
Lina’s literacy narrative is firmly situated in the present and looking towards a future marked by newly-available routes toward enhanced learning and cross-cultural communication. The final scene doesn’t dwell on any specific technology or teach the audience how to make these digital connections. That next step is the audiences’ responsibility, she seems to suggest. By sharing her point of view, watching the screen on which these narratives enfold, the audience has become the protagonist learning how to embark on his or her own literacy adventure. And Lina’s narrative has also suggested a useful guide: other DALN contributors. This use of the DALN points toward the value of the archive as a source of insights, advice, and data for individual researchers of all kinds. Lina refuses to identify (and thereby limit) her target audience, but she does enlist their participation to interpret her narrative and connect it to their own lives.

7.3 Collection 2: 3…2…1

This group was loosely connected through their concern with the sociocultural complexities of new and alternative literacies. Unlike in the previous collection, these contributors chose to let each argument stand on its own terms, linked only through the basic countdown that each included and adapted. When the group’s narratives are considered together, however, this countdown serves to highlight the performative nature of each. At the bottom of the countdown, the audience can imagine the word ‘Action’ prompting the entertaining videos that follow. The two compositions here, like the others in their group, push the literacy narrative genre in new directions, from individuals’ past learning experiences toward suggestions for collective learning in the future. These authors challenge their audiences to participate in unfolding public narratives.
7.3.1 Dave’s “Video Games and Their Effects”: Performing Play-based Learning

“Video Games and Their Effects” relies upon the author’s autobiographical backstory as the foundation for its argument: Dave grew up playing video games. Along the way, despite the nay-sayers, he realized that these supposedly escapist games were actually teaching him real-world skills: “They not only give us a much-needed escape from reality, but they require us to think, and analyze everything… it takes strong analysis skills… and good listening skills” (blog, 2/20). This literacy narrative served as his platform for sharing “my own personal experience with video games,” but it is definitely not about Dave’s past (proposal). Instead, it offers an in-process account of his interjection into educational discourses: “I want to show people that these games are much more than useless time wasters that drain our brains, but rather a sources of learning” (proposal). Like several others, this literacy narrative is not particularly narrative in nature. Dave and the audience are the only real characters; the only events represented are manufactured or manipulated to illustrate his argument. Nevertheless, Dave’s personal history made that argument possible and persuasive. “Video Games and Their Effects” combats assumptions that video games are a waste of time by suggesting their value in developing fundamental learning skills and encouraging his audience to attend to this potential: “I want people to be able to talk about what they’ve experienced with these types of games and maybe be able to realize the effects that the games have had on them” (proposal). The selection and arrangement of elements demonstrates Dave’s hoped-for balance of education and entertainment: “I want this to be funny and

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63 In this, Dave joins eminent scholars like James Paul Gee (2003), Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe (2007), and Jonathan Alexander (2009), in examining video game literacy, but from an autoethnographic angle.
entertaining, but be able to make people think” (proposal). This narrative about popular attitudes towards video games and resulting neglect of their pedagogical value enlists audiences in its future by encouraging them to reconsider their own pasts.

7.3.1.1 Narration as Performance

Dave’s scripted voiceover, illustrated and animated by intertextual elements (DALN interviews, YouTube clips, and of course, lots of video games), combine to create an engaging storytelling persona. These elements invite the audience to adopt the vision of a gamer from the very first shots. The dramatic and carefully timed opening sets the tone for Dave’s own narration, which opens, “Welcome to the underwater utopia of Rapture… You may be thinking, ‘Isn’t this just a video game?’” As his audience shares the perspective of the game’s protagonist, he/we are impaled from behind. As he/we look down at the bloody drill, listen to his/our screams, and turn to be hit by the assailant, Dave’s voice continues—and the audience is effectively hooked. This gripping introduction is made possible because Dave borrows BioShock's own focalization, though which players share the subjective perspective of the characters they're controlling. By offering his audience this player perspective in his opening scenes, Dave immerses them in the world of gaming.

This intimacy is reinforced by Dave’s use of direct (sometimes challenging) address to his audience, his informal diction, and his reliance on humor. Dave’s shifting pronouns are key to his rhetorical performance. The narrator uses “I” when referring to his experience and resulting expertise; he engages the audience as “you” in a

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64 Britta Neitzel (2005) suggests that video game narration is a really a question of “who acts?” and notes that these choices affect the player’s “distance from the virtual world” (p. 57). Dave’s treatment would seem to support this claim and indicate its rhetorical uses outside of the game world.
conversational way; and the prevalent “we” aligns Dave’s voice and perspective with the audience’s own. These hypothetical exchanges and shifting pronouns characterize the audience as like him, drawn in by humor, swearing, and flashy effects: the dismissal of chess as dull “strategic plastic pawn-pushing” over a video of joyless children; the glorification of technological warfare; the “Oh, snap” back-up. In the midst of laying out his argument, Dave also pokes fun at himself. As the voiceover lists “patience” among the skills earned from gaming, at the audience sees a young man (Dave) swearing at a screen, slamming down his controller, and storming away (twice). This back-and-forth between logic and humor enables the narrator to develop credibility with young gamer audiences as well as their educators. His point made, Dave uses the collective “we” to involve the audience in his concluding arguments: “We no longer can look at video games as mindless brain-drainers in this digital age, for they offer us too many skills that we may not learn as well in a classroom.” The narration has, by this point, told the audience into the story and enlisted their involvement in its resolution, or lack thereof.

7.3.1.2 Directing Audience Response

With such a busy visual, audio, and gestural narration, and perhaps wary of the distractions offered by his entertaining approach, Dave guides his audience’s attention throughout. His title reveals little of the literacy narrative’s central point, perhaps to draw in resistant audiences. But as my description of the introduction above suggested, such restraint vanishes within the video, which pulls out all the stops to make his argument clear and compelling. After that graphic opening, Dave lays out his three-pronged argument about video games: they can teach patience, enhance focus and problem-solving, and hone teamwork skills. He follows this claim with supporting evidence
through the extended comparison to chess and analysis of, in particular, the skills developed through playing *World of Warcraft*. The extended comparison between video games and chess, both games that involves controlling units to defeat an opponent, reinforces Dave’s argument that video games deserve more respect than they receive. That respect should be based on the (repeatedly stated) benefits of gaming—patience, problem-solving, and teamwork—each of which receives its own section and support. His conclusion restates this central argument and suggests its implications for the audience. The structure of the video is straightforward, somewhat reminiscent of the classic college essay: catchy introduction, thesis statement, support, and concluding consideration of the stakes of the argument. It may be that Dave was loath to take generic risks because of his investment in the clarity of his argument. This move might also reflect his attention to the teacher/researcher contingent of his audience, as discussed below.

7.3.1.3 Prompting Dialogue through Monologue

The relationship established between author and audience in this video is friendly and informal but also quite carefully orchestrated by Dave’s voiceover. Although his narration creates the illusion of dialogue—“Don’t believe me?”—the author leaves very little up to the audience as he lays out his argument. Those moments in which he implies a resistant audience suggest that Dave was concerned not that the audience wouldn’t understand his message but that they wouldn’t buy it. This may have something to do with the variety of audiences he imagined, which would include gamers “who don’t understand that benefits they are getting” as well as those “who believe they are a waste of time” (proposal). The last line of the video offers an interesting glimpse of Dave’s
negotiation of the DALN’s multiple audiences. Although the final “we” refers to fellow students, that preceding “we” seems to include literacy scholars who cannot “afford” to neglect this learning tool. From this angle, Dave’s combination of entertainment and argument enables him to develop credibility with young gamer audiences as well as serious researchers, and to characterize himself as both. By subtly identifying with and appealing to gamers, learners, teachers, researchers, policy-makers, etc., Dave ultimately unifies these roles into a public with a common goal: critical thinking and communication skills. So although the audience is not pressed into service to decode his message, they are very much enlisted in its implementation. His rhetorical choices position all of these audiences as characters in the ongoing narrative of literacy learning and learning about literacy and invite them to take a lead role in developing a more playful, inclusive future.

7.3.2 Danny’s “Newspapers are Dying”: Recruiting Critical Literates

This literacy narrative, at least on the surface, is far less personal than public: “Newspapers are Dying” concerns itself with the media literacy of average citizens who find themselves negotiating changes in the production and distribution of the news. Danny’s relationship to this issue was grounded in autobiographical reflections; as a journalism major, he was invested in these issues: “Blogs and social networking sites make sharing the news open to the public. But is this a good thing? In ways yes. Everyone has equal power to speak their mind on the issues going on. However it tends to give the guy who has no clue about anything the same power as a guy who is an expert in their field” (blog, 2/26). As someone training in that field, Danny had a particular stake in conversations about “the role the internet is playing in our society and the way we are getting our information” (proposal). In the video, however, that personal investment is
never explained and a planned section on “the options of jobs and the future outlook for journalism” was dropped (proposal). Instead, Danny positioned himself as just another news reader, aligning himself with his audience while pushing them towards critical consumption.

“Newspapers are Dying” traces broad changes in literacy practices in recent U.S. history “to examine personal news reporting” as the Internet shifts “the power of the media from the reporters and media to the people themselves” (blog, 2/25). The story begins with a montage illustrating the heyday of newspapers before recounting the recent reversal of that fortune through which the rise of online media outlets has changed not only how people access, but also who controls and circulates, the news. Despite the title, Danny doesn’t cling to a regressive trajectory by simply lamenting the fall of newspapers. Instead, he focuses on the present and future implications of these changes. The central character in this narrative, it becomes apparent, is not the author or even the field of journalism. It is contemporary citizens facing a rapidly changing public sphere, one in which they have more options, more agency, and more responsibility. As such, the story has no conclusion, just an ongoing negotiation of public discourse that, like this narrative, demands the active involvement of the audience. Danny’s literacy narrative is therefore a call for critical literacy, a balance of individual agency and collective responsibility that will regulate the news market in our uncharted future.

7.3.2.1 Behind the Headlines

Blending the conventions of print news (bold, centered headlines) and television news (the scrolling text along the bottom of the screen), the alphabetic narration is somewhat detached, reminiscent of the impersonal voice of a news reporter. The narrator
never identifies himself or his own personal/professional investment in the topic of news media. (Danny does appear briefly twice—reading a newspaper in the opening sequence and using his visual argument about movie piracy as an example of user-generated content—but the audience is given no indication that he is the author.) Without his oral voice or individual experience to guide audience responses, Danny relies on visual pointers like font colors and background images to organize and communicate his argument. The introduction, in black and white with classic reporter soundtrack, establishes the centrality of newspapers in everyday life, only to interrupt that nostalgia with the sound of a record scratching. The drama of this disruption is heightened by the use of red and the provocative headline, “Newspapers are Dying.” This warning red is repeated at another point of tension, emphasizing the risks that attend the proliferation of independent reporting. The series of questions that conclude the video provide the final message that the answers are up to the audience.

7.3.2.2 Reporting Shared Responsibilities

For the first half of this video, there are no personal pronouns. It is only when the video shifts in focus from historical context to present and future responses that a collective narration begins: “The power is now in our hands to create and report news.” The remainder of the video is narrated in the plural, eliding the distinction between storyteller and audience in favor of a collective identification. Throughout, visual and audio choices shape the mood: nostalgia for newspapers is represented through black-and-white film and zippy music; the scratching sound and ominous soundtrack color our perception of newspapers’ changing status; calmer classical music resists an alarmist reaction to these changes; dramatic tones accompany the representation of untrustworthy
reporting and underline the audience’s role in the ongoing drama. Between the alphabetic prompts, the shared focalization situates both author and audience in front of the computer screen on which these images arise, solidifying their identification and mutual responsibility.

7.3.2.3 Trajectory beyond the Turning Point

“Newspapers are Dying” is organized into distinct episodes delineated by alphabetic titles and the mood of their accompanying music. In the first two sections, newspapers are celebrated and seemingly defeated, indicating a classic tragic narrative: progressive rise to glory followed by regressive fall. But that structure is complicated as the narrative continues, encouraging dramatic engagement through swift changes. In the next episode, titles relate the shift of news online and the rise of interactive media—the collective “we” now shares the power of creating and reporting the news—while bright classical music suggests a mood of optimism. The final turning point is cued by another red title, visually paralleling the dramatic opening headline: “With no gatekeeper, that means EVERYONE can report news.” This final section, marked by suspenseful music and challenging questions, presents images of web sites designed to spread “hate and lies.” (The selection of these illustrations suggests the narrator’s “we” does not include white supremacists, among other groups.) The concluding chapter is marked by a series of questions that ask the audience to make the next move: “What will the future hold?” The structure of this narrative is a bit like a roller coaster; the final sections offer a kind of uneasy stability that will not last, and the next direction is unknown. But the audience, the author suggests, will help determine the next episode.
7.3.2.4 Critical Framing: Enlisting Audiences’ Literacies

“Newspapers are Dying” works to construct an audience aligned behind the practice of critical composition, whether interpreting news from various media or contributing to those conversations. Danny plays with his audience a bit, appearing in uncredited Hitchcock-esque cameos but otherwise leaving his individuality on the sidelines to focus on larger sociocultural issues. Rather than telling the audience how to handle these complexities, Danny enlists for their participation in thinking them through. As a literacy narrative, this one is decidedly not autobiographical in focus—but it remains a narrative in which Danny recounts a subjective view of history to an audience and with purpose. “We” are the protagonist here, characterized as open-minded but critical; “we” do not believe white supremacists’ version of Dr. Martin Luther King’s life, nor that the Holocaust was a fraud. Danny thereby excludes certain audiences from his narrative while establishing common ground with others. The concluding questions ask the audience to make a choice between blind acceptance and careful analysis, leaving them/us in control of the future. This is a bold move, turning the literacy narrative into a kind of choose-your-own-adventure story in which the audience must determine the outcome. This alternative to the classic literacy narrative is not without drawbacks; in fact, it was rejected by the DALN for not fitting within their definition. I conclude with this text for precisely that reason: Danny’s assessment of the rhetorical stakes of literacy narratives pushed that genre in new directions that merit attention from teachers and researchers, a point I will return to shortly.
8. Conclusion

As these students’ literacy narratives attest, the process of studying literacy in theory and practice equipped students with what we began to call metaliteracy, the ability to consciously ‘read’ and ‘write’ their own literacy beliefs and practice. It also prepared them to offer valuable insights to offer public discourses. And so I turn now to the final of my follow-up questions: What can composition studies take away from students’ rhetorical narratives? I offer here only two suggestions based on the wealth of ideas raised by students’ work in this course: First, students’ revised genre of literacy narratives may offer a productive route into public engagement for composition studies as well as students. Second, students’ revision of rhetorical narrative toward narrative rhetoric suggests valuable questions about its potential in composition pedagogy and public discourse.

8.1 Positioning Literacy Narratives in Public Spaces

Given the persuasive power accorded to narrative, literacy narratives would seem to hold potential for public influence, an opportunity available to composition studies as a field as well as students as individuals. By assigning literacy narratives, we invite students into our research, soliciting their participation and validating their knowledge. By positioning those literacy narratives within public spaces, we encourage students to situate their resulting insights within larger conversations about teaching and learning. Or, I should say, conversations about education, which as students noted can be a different matter entirely. In light of the prevalence of political debates about the ends and means of institutional education, and the customary confrontational rhetoric employed in those debates, the perspective of actual students seems sorely needed. Students’
understanding of their own learning processes and critiques of unproductive pedagogies stand to contribute to these conversations, if we can help them find a way to enter them. As Peter Mortensen has warned, the failure to engage in these larger arenas means that “we consign ourselves to mere spectatorship in national, regional—and most importantly, local—struggles over what counts as literacy and who should have opportunities to attain it” (1998, p. 193). Composition does the same to students’ examination of these issues—leave them on the sidelines—if we fail to encourage the same kind of participation in our classes. By situating students’ work with public spheres, even or especially micropublics like the DALN, we encourage students to get into the game. As Christian Weiser (2004) argues, “By looking at public writing in context, we allow students to see how to use the tools of language to their best interests and in the process discover how textual production—such as public writing—helps to shape and construct knowledge rather than simply reproduce it” (Weisser, 2004, p. 235). Moreover, by positioning students’ own work as public writing, we enable students to deploy those tools in the interest of public dialogue. This challenge, of course, is one that also faces composition studies as a whole. We tend to believe that our knowledge would be of value in public discourses, but we also often struggle to find a point of entry. Literacy narratives may very well offer a genre for public influence, especially if we can find or invent the spaces within such influence might occur.

The DALN is obviously one such site, and participating in its project offered students a valuable opportunity to explore public-oriented rhetoric. But the rejection of several students’ videos (including Danny’s) as not fitting the conventional definition of literacy narrative indicates certain limits to that project’s pedagogical applicability. This
is not a criticism of the DALN, whose mission is to collect and preserve personal
narratives, not necessarily to provide a forum for rhetorical exchange. Nevertheless, its
utility for this purpose, along with its limitations, suggest the value in such a space that
connects conversations about literacy in academic and public settings: a YouTube
channel, for example, or a social network that would encourage user-generated content
and interaction. As composition studies continues to navigate its public turn, the potential
of literacy narratives to produce genuine dialogue about education, identity, access, and
power should not be underestimated. Nor should the challenges that confront us when we
consider how best to place and position literacy narratives in public discourse for
rhetorical reach and potential influence. This tension raised key questions during the final
days of the course, questions that have remained with me: Where do rhetorical literacy
narratives belong? How can they be deployed to achieve their public agendas?

8.2 Narrating Personal Knowledge in Public Spaces

In the spirit of learning from students, I also suggest that their revisions of the
genre of literacy narrative bear attention. As a collective, these students contributed to—
or rather, created—a genre of the rhetorical literacy narrative that may or may not be
explicitly autobiographical. At times I would wonder where the autobiographical went,
why students’ literacy narratives seemed sometimes deliberately impersonal. But the
evidence presented in this chapter suggests that students’ orientation toward learning and
literacy is inherently personal, a connection we sometimes miss. In this light, for
example, Danny’s video might be considered an exercise in professional development, a
validation of expertise and integrity in journalism via a call for audience discernment.
Reconsidering these texts within the context of the course, it becomes clear that students’
investments in these projects were grounded in their individual concerns and conversations about the high stakes of literacy in their everyday lives and broader spheres. The process of investigating their own experiences led to autobiographical perspectives that they did not necessarily feel the need to elaborate upon in their compositions. In a similar way, the narrative orientation to rhetoric did not seem to require the relation of a series of related events. Instead, narrative seemed to designate an exchange about issues of mutual interest; narrative rhetoric in students’ work seems based in the dynamic established among author, audience, and text. In this light some students’ departures from strict narrativity merit attention for the questions they raise about autobiographical narratives: To what extent do people understand different styles of communication as self-representation? What is the relationship between drawing from personal experience and considering the resulting communication a self-representation? These questions prompt others about narrative as a mode of communication: How do people define and identify narrative texts? How might those criteria differ from and inform our understanding of narrative communication? How might audiences respond differently to a text offered or interpreted as narrative in nature? Ultimately, as I turn toward the conclusion with more questions than answers, I return to that original refrain: How does narrative rhetoric work?
1. Project Summary

This project was originally motivated by two broad questions: *How does narrative rhetoric work?* and *What are the implications for composition studies?* The first question was born out of my long-standing fascination with the ways that narratives—from traditional myths to experimental films—are constructed and deployed to influence their audiences. And the second arose from a commitment to connecting research and teaching, theory and practice. That second question became my central priority in this research project, but it remains inextricable from the first. Because I was and am convinced that narrative may well be “the most powerful form of persuasion” (Brockmeier & Harré, 2001, p. 41), training students to recognize and employ its power responsibly seems imperative. And yet most discussions of narrative in composition studies remain bound up in epistemological debates and disciplinary politics, leaving most *uses* of narrative in composition pedagogy similarly constrained by history and convention. In a way, then, my project was simple: I wanted to figure out what (else) narrative rhetoric could do in the composition classroom and thereby to better understand what it might accomplish in public discourses. This dissertation was designed to pursue these dual lines of inquiry, to enlist students’ help in figuring out how narrative works...
and how it might work for them and for composition studies.

To those ends, I focused my attention on the variety of narrative most prominent in composition: personal/autobiographical narrative. Looking to students as primary informants, I developed a series of experimental courses to investigate several interrelated questions:

1. How have students been taught to read and compose autobiographical narratives?
2. What concepts and approaches might contribute to a production-oriented narrative rhetoric?
3. How might a rhetorical approach to narrative contribute to students’ learning and to composition studies as a whole?
4. What can students’ multimodal designs contribute to our understanding of narrative rhetoric in public discourse?

These questions form the shifting ground upon which this project has been constructed. Below I provide a brief summary of each chapter’s focus and findings before turning back to those big questions to assess this project’s contributions to an understanding of narrative rhetoric in composition studies and beyond.

In the introduction, I rehearse the history of personal narrative in composition studies, from the current-traditional mode of discourse to expressivist method of self-empowerment to site of identity-politics inquiry. Throughout this history, scholars and teachers have debated the merits of personal narrative in terms of student-centered pedagogies, academic discourse, and critical consciousness. Without diminishing the value of these conversations, I suggest that they have resulted in a terministic screen that emphasizes psychological and personal concerns to the relative neglect of the rhetorical uses of autobiographical composition. In order to more fully attend to the richness of narrative communication, I suggest an alternative set of terminology gleaned from
humanistic and social scientific rhetorical theories of narrative. This narrative 
communication model became both a heuristic for analysis and heurtic for production of 
rhetorical narratives in the courses documented herein.

In Chapter 2, “Illustrating Lives,” I offer the results of a required composition 
course devoted to the study of graphic memoir. Through their examinations of primary 
texts, students developed a critical frame that emphasized comics’ unique capabilities for 
representing an author’s layered identity and perspective while demanding the active 
engagement of the audience. These insights informed students’ composition of their own 
graphic memoirs of their own, three of which are discussed extensively. Based on these 
readings, I suggest some pedagogical affordances and constraints of graphic memoir:

Whereas the comics medium served to highlight the constructed nature of self-
presentation and the interactive dynamic of meaning-making, the memoir genre seemed 
to reinforce students’ assumptions of personal narratives’ expressivist agenda. Indeed, the 
students who focused on external purposes and audiences tended to fall back on tidy 
moral conclusions. More notably, students felt loath to share their memoirs even within 
the class community, suggesting their continued emphasis on self-reflection and privacy 
over audience-oriented purpose. This chapter concludes with a discussion of one area of 
emphasis that permeates the entire project: students’ assessment and evaluation of their 
experiences working with multimodal narrative. Based on their feedback, I argue that the 
element of surprise that results from unconventional media and genres can enhance 
students’ awareness of not only rhetoric in unexpected spaces and forms but also the 
varieties of literacy essential to effective participation in contemporary culture.

“Documenting Lives” furthers the investigations of multimodal narrative through
the hybrid genre of autobiographical documentary. In this course, students confronted their own assumptions about objectivity and subjectivity while negotiating the ethical issues inherent in documentary filmmaking. Students’ responses to primary texts resulted in a critical frame that informed their own autobiographical documentaries; here, again, I analyze three texts to illustrate core findings. Although many students continued to struggle with the tellability of their personal experiences, they also seemed more comfortable with the rhetoricity of documentary than previous students were with memoir. As a result, students designed their videos for audiences beyond themselves. Even as they seemed to appreciate the opportunity to examine their own lives and interests, the emphasis tipped toward audience influence. However, students’ audiences remained limited to the local: the class community (sometimes as stand-in for other college students) and their friends and families. In this light, autobiographical documentary seems to productively disrupt reductive views of personal narrative while not necessarily prompting students to see their compositions as contributing to broader public discourses. Nevertheless, this hybrid genre does seem to prompt heightened, complex considerations to the ethics of representation and the rhetorical stakes of identification. In the conclusion to this chapter, therefore, I focus on the second area of emphasis of this project: the value of rhetorical approaches to narrative for composition pedagogies. Based on available data, I suggest that autobiographical documentary holds promise for sharpening student’s rhetorical consciousness while fostering an ethical orientation to communication.

Chapter 4, “Narrating Literacies,” documents a digital media course in which student examined and composed narrative representations of literacy. This approach
departs from the previous chapters by considering narrative as a mode of communication, offering a focal point for autobiographical inquiry, and providing a public exigency in the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives. By examining the demands for and implications of multiliteracies in the digital age, students constructed a critical frame that emphasized common concerns about relationships, education, and rhetoric. These conversations informed students’ development and design of video literacy narratives for the DALN, four of which I consider as representative examples. These compositions serve to demonstrate students’ negotiations of the rhetorical situation of the DALN and their own experience-based, audience-oriented contributions to public discourses about literacy. They also illuminate an interesting tension between rhetorical narratives and narrative rhetoric: whereas students’ texts often exhibited low narrativity or seeming impersonality, they were also deliberately dialogic in tone and form. The conclusion to this chapter is therefore devoted to a consideration of how composition studies can employ literacy narratives, broadly conceived, to promote students’ autobiographical inquiry en route to public engagement.

2. Affordances and Constraints of Rhetorical Narratives in Composition Pedagogy

I began this dissertation by pointing toward a gap in the narrative turn that may serve as an opportunity for composition studies to reassess our disciplinary history with narrative en route to contributing to this interdisciplinary work. (I will return to these potential contributions in the next section.) As I hope the intervening chapters have amply demonstrated, a rhetorical approach to narrative seems compatible with some of composition’s central goals. Students’ work serves as strong evidence that by combining multimodal composing with narrative theories, composition pedagogy can expand upon
the classic benefits of personal writing by foregrounding the authority of experience, demanding multicultural negotiation, promoting ethical communication, and highlighting the role of rhetoric in personal and public discourses. This is not to suggest that these courses were without problematic elements. The lack of attention to ethics in Chapter 4 is a good example: Because we were juggling so many aspects of communication, I failed to place sufficient weight on the ethics of representation. When students began to draw from the DALN, borrowing others’ stories for their own purposes, they did so without the firm grounding in ethical considerations achieved by the students who studied documentary in Chapter 3. I suspect that connecting literacy narratives to documentary, for example, may remedy this problem. In this way, the variety of genres and modes engaged in this project offer a range of options for adaptation according to students’ and teachers’ priorities. I’ve begun imagining a dream course in which students compose micro- and graphic memoirs about literacy learning before embarking upon a documentary project prompted by their personal experiences and developed for public distribution. Such a public orientation matters to me more (or differently) than it may to other teachers, as evidenced in my consistent attention to students’ conceptions of their audiences and purposes.

2.1 Autobiographical Narrative and/in Public Spaces

And in this area, the results of this research project have been decidedly mixed. On the whole, students responded enthusiastically and critically to conversations about self-presentation, strategic identification, and the potential influence of autobiographical narrative. But they also tended not to imagine their own rhetorical narratives as belonging within public spaces. Indeed, the most audience-focused narratives often suffered from
oversimplification in the interests of a coherent message, while the explicitly public-oriented texts tend to shy away from autobiographical emphasis. Students’ tendencies to downplay the personal in their autobiographical compositions (as in Chapters 3 and 4) are worthy of note. As Anne Herrington suggests to scholars, “We should try to bring ‘the personal’ into our thinking in conscious and critical ways and then decide for ourselves whether and how to include it in our public writing, whatever the genre” (Brandt et al., p. 49). The same may be said of the public-oriented composing we ask students to do.

Students’ personal investments—in literacy development or family histories or career options—may very well authorize and encourage them to engage in wider discourses from a position of critical self-inquiry. But that should not mean we demand that they expose all of that thinking to outsiders’ scrutiny. For this reason, I suggest, those of us engaged in the public turn may want to prioritize the narrative mode of rhetoric while de-emphasizing the autobiographical emphasis. That is, we can draw productively upon students’ personal experiences to prompt research and engagement while encouraging them to translate that personal perspective into non-autobiographical genres. Such an approach might create an alternative kind of personal narrative, as suggested by Victor Villanueva: “someone saying something to someone from a particular view of reality that seeks to make that reality known” (Brandt et al., 2001, p. 52). This perspective might be well suited to the narrative self-portraits offered by many students (Phelan, 2007) as well as with their adaptation of the literacy narrative genre to suit their own goals.

2.2 Narrative Genres and/in Public Spaces

The different understandings of purpose and audience that emerged within each of these courses had as much, if not more, to do students’ situated practice as with my
instruction. That is, their pre-existing definitions of genres persisted in influencing their eventual uses of those genres. With memoirs, students arrived with an emphasis on memory and privacy that was born out in their own compositions, in spite of their parallel attention to the interactive dynamics of communication. The genre of documentary, on the other hand, brought along associations with truth but also with audience and influence; as a result, students were more likely to view their own autobiographical videos as being designed for circulation. Along these lines, the relative willingness to publicize their personal stories in literacy narratives may perhaps be traced to students’ lack of recognition of literacy narrative as a genre. Without familiar conventions and expectations to guide them, students felt authorized to design their own genre, a distinct variation on literacy narratives as defined in much composition research and pedagogy. The fact that students’ compositions often do not quite fit traditional definitions of narrative may be attributed, in part, to our emphasis on narrative-based argument. But their comfort with the label of narrative for—and circulation of—arguments grounded in their own experience is worthy of note.

Asking students to compose autobiographical genres without specifying an area of focus leaves them reaching for a tellable story and, often, resorting to conventional narratives like the transition to college, an influential travel experience, or the death of a loved one. As the students who participated in this research have shown, particularly in Chapters 2 and 4, there can be great value in this work: they left the course with new ideas and skills as well as a final project of which most were proud and willing to show off to friends and family. But their compositions remained contained and isolated because there seemed no outlet or exigency for publication. This limitation may be a factor of the
open-ended autobiographical approach. The value of the expansive definition of autobiography is that it validates students’ own experiences and authorizes the telling of their stories. The downside may be that students select a personal experience or issue that, while relatable, has no apparent context in which to be placed. I think the ‘personal’—both too broad and too specific—may prevent students from envisioning these narratives, however rhetorically sophisticated, as having public relevance. In Chapter 4, however, we see new possibilities for public engagement based on a common theme that permeates just about every aspect of students’ lives. Students’ treatments of literacy narratives, moreover, indicate their value as a site of invention and collaboration.

2.3 Genre, Invention, and Narrative Designs

Because the genres engaged throughout this project are new (or new to students) and obviously in development, students actively participate in the discovery and invention of conventions. The degree to which this is the case increases over the course of the three chapters: Graphic memoir relies on a well-established set of comics conventions that students are often considering for the first time; autobiographical documentary negotiates dual, often competing, expectations; but literacy narrative is a recognized genre only for teachers and researchers—students must create their own generic conventions as they go. In each case, though, students felt themselves on the cutting edge of criticism and creation. This productive uncertainty was reinforced by my own level of expertise in these genres and media, which was modest at best. I could honestly tell students I did not know much more than they did, that my area of specialty was in rhetoric and composition, and that we would use those perspectives to build knowledge together. Their investigations arose from a design process that was
fundamentally one of praxis: students moved from theory to practice and back again, reshaping their perspectives on selfhood and communication. According to Gunther Kress, “[a]n adequate theory of semiosis will be founded on a recognition of the ‘interested action’ of socially located, culturally and historically formed individuals, as the remakers, the transformers, and the re-shapers of the representational resources available to them” (p. 155). If that is the case, then these students were engaged in theory-building as well as text-building. Just as composition studies has argued in favor of treating our students’ writing as literature, this study suggests the value of treating our students’ work as scholarship. In this spirit, I turn now to consider how students’ experiences in these courses speak to my central guiding question, How does narrative rhetoric work?

3. Toward Rhetoric as Narrative

Let me begin, or rather conclude, by trying to define this phrase—narrative rhetoric—that has guided everything that has come before. What does it mean to yoke narrative to rhetoric? And how is it different from a rhetorical narrative? In the introduction to this dissertation I offered the explanation that all narratives are rhetorical, but that I would be borrowing John Lewis Lucaites and Celeste Michelle Condit’s (1985) definition of a rhetorical narrative as one that “exists for a purpose beyond its own textuality... Both content and form of the rhetorical narrative are thus subservient to the demands of the relationship between the specific audience to which it is addressed, the specific context in which it appears, and the specific gain toward which it strives” (p. 94). So a rhetorical narrative is a kind of text, an act of communication. By studying and composing rhetorical narratives, students in this research project have participated in the
development of narrative rhetoric as a theoretical framework for practical
communication. What’s been fascinating to observe is the way that students’ narrative
praxis has yielded fairly consistent emphasis on conscientious rhetorical listening to
others’ narratives and ethical handling of others—audiences as well as subjects—in one’s
own narratives.

Narrative rhetoric, in this light, may be considered a mode of communication, an
orientation to persuasion that is grounded in the give-and-take of storytelling. It seems to
be dialogic in tone, in form, in intention. A narrative rhetoric is as premised upon
listening as speaking, reading for the author’s intentions but also attending to what’s not
being said. The central questions of narration—who speaks? who sees?—lead to other
essential questions about whose voices are not heard, whose perspectives are not offered,
and the ethical implications of those choices. As students regularly modeled in these
courses, plurality of perspectives may be a hallmark of narrative rhetoric. Challenged to
design multimodal narratives, most students deemed polyvocal narration a key strategy.
Their preference for letting those other voices speak for themselves suggests a distinct
Bakhtinian bent; although the word heteroglossia was never used, students recognized
that in trying to represent complex realities, they needed more than their own individual
voice. Moreover, many recognized that texts that invite audience participation, that resist
easy interpretation, are most likely to prompt discussion and thereby achieve influence.

I’ve been arguing throughout that a rhetorical approach to narrative fosters ethical
and critical multiliteracies. Here I suggest that a narrative approach to rhetoric may foster
a dialogic orientation to communication. This is not, of course, a new claim. Walter
Fisher (1985, 1989) has argued for years in defense of his narrative paradigm as a way of
understanding all human communication. Although I cannot claim that this research supports such a sweeping categorization, students’ compositions and critical reflections suggest the value of narrative as way of approaching communication in a particular way. As Jerome Bruner (1990) suggests, narrative “provides a basis for rhetoric without confrontation” (p. 52). The importance of that foundation cannot be underestimated as we encounter daily reminders of the counterproductive reliance on confrontation and competition. This seems to be a kairotic moment for narrative rhetoric. And yet, even as narrative studies across the discipline have boomed, as Kevin McClure recently pointed out, they have “become virtually dead subjects” in rhetorical theory (2009, p. 190). Scholars who explicitly consider the rhetorical dimensions of narrative communication have yet to elaborate upon the details of strategic design (Ritchie & Wilson, 2000; Harris, 2004; Danielewicz, 2008). As a result, we have yet to develop a critical vocabulary for theory or practice. Redressing this neglect in composition pedagogy may become an integral part of collaborative revision toward a generative praxis of narrative rhetoric. Part of the challenge faced by narrative may be the general assumption that personal writing is alphabetic writing, that nonfiction is prose, that essays are print-based. One contribution of this project, therefore, is towards a composition-oriented framework for multimodal narrative rhetoric. Another is the invention and assessment of resources for dialogic narrative design, a task in which I suggest students make excellent partners. What these colleagues have taught me is the potential value to be found in approaching not just narrative as rhetoric, but *rhetoric as narrative*. When I call this a kairotic moment for narrative rhetoric, I mean to suggest the full weight of kairos, as elaborated by Michael Harker (2007), to mean not just opportunity but ethical imperative to act. If
narrative affords a dialogic approach to rhetoric, and composition teaches students how to act rhetorically, and has increasing opportunities to reach public learners, then we have a welcome responsibility to work towards narrative rhetoric in the classroom and beyond.
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Chapter 2: Illustrating Lives syllabus, Spring 2010

In an era of reality television, YouTube, Facebook, and the confessional memoir, the practice of crafting our own (and, by extension, others’) lives has become ubiquitous. Every day we are surrounded by personal lives made public and public issues made personal, all through the power of storytelling. And so, as authors and audiences of these everyday narratives—from personal conversations to political debates, religious sermons to reality shows—we must be critically aware of their persuasive potential in order to participate effectively and ethically in all kinds of communication. Together, we will work to foster our rhetorical consciousness, our capacity to create and critique the discourses that shape our lives and communities.

This course will explore these rhetorical uses of personal stories, how they are constructed and communicated to produce certain effects on their audiences, through the lens of contemporary graphic memoir. Drawing on various strategies of rhetorical analysis, we will look beneath popular assumptions about “comics” in order to consider how and why they work to influence audience responses to the issues, events, and lives they document. Our explorations will consider what it means to “illustrate” a life in context, to represent the self in relation to society, and to compose these personal/public narratives as rhetorical acts.

This is a writing-intensive course designed to foster your development as active writers and thinkers within your communities. Class readings, discussions, and writing assignments have been designed to build upon the foundation you established in English 110 in order to support more sophisticated rhetorical analysis and practice. You will have the opportunity to practice your skills of critical thinking, careful analysis and interpretation, and developing clear, compelling arguments supported by thoughtful evidence. In addition to several essays and informal writing, you will each produce your own short works of graphic memoir that you will share with the class.

Please note all necessary technological skills will be taught in class; you do not need to be tech-savvy already in order to succeed in this course. All you need is a spirit of exploration, a willingness to ask for help, and faith in your own abilities.

The GEC
Goals and Objectives for the General Education Curriculum: Writing and Related Skills
Goals/Rationale: Writing courses across the disciplines develop students’ skills in writing, reading, critical thinking, and oral expression.

Learning Objectives:

- Students apply basic skills in expository writing
- Students demonstrate critical thinking through written and oral expression
- Students retrieve and use written information analytically and effectively
Required Materials

- Speigelmann, *Maus* (Volumes 1 & 2)
- Satrapi, *Persepolis* (Volumes 1 & 2)
- McCloud, *Understanding Comics*
- Jump drive

Participation --- 20%

- **Preparation**: Come to class prepared to discuss readings, share drafts, and engage in a productive learning and teaching. Note: I reserve the right to give pop quizzes if I suspect a lack of preparation.
- **Engagement**: You are expected to actively participate in whole-class and small-group discussions, to workshop your own and others’ work conscientiously and productively, and to contribute to a supportive and challenging learning environment.
- **Contributions to the course blog**: The blog is a space for ongoing discussion of the texts and issues raised in class. Your posts may either relate directly to primary or secondary readings or draw connections to related experiences or texts. You must compose a minimum of one (150+ words) post and contribute two (50+ words) comments on your peers’ posts each week. This amounts to at least 10 posts and 20 comments over the course of the quarter. The weekly blog assignment should be fulfilled each Sunday by midnight.

Composition 1: 3 x 6 --- 25%
For this assignment, you will compose 3 mini-memoirs based on *SMITH Magazine*’s “6 word memoir” model. But in this case, you will compose 3 variations:

- 6-word memoir
- 6-image memoir (presented in Powerpoint or equivalent slides)
- 66-word memoir

Each of these exercises should deal with the same subject/relationship/experience. The goal of this assignment is to play with a variety of ways of exploring and communicating experience and to help you prepare for the more extended memoir in Composition 3. This assignment includes a 2-page critical reflection on the process and results:

**Analytical Summary**: For this portion, explain the memoirs’ messages/purposes and how each version conveys this. As in any analysis, your primary goal here is to explore not just what happens or why, but how. What are the rhetorical strategies you employed to achieve your particular goal(s) for your target audiences? For example, you might focus on how you used punctuation or visual effects to communicate your message effectively. In essence, perform a rhetorical analysis of your own texts as you will do for someone else’s in Composition 2.

**Critical Reflection**: Looking back over the 3 variations, what were the affordances and constraints of each? That is, what did each allow or disallow? What did you learn about composing in different media? What was most rewarding, illuminating, frustrating? If you could select another way to tell this story (video, audio, collage, etc.), what would it be? How did this assignment influence the way you read texts? How might it help you prepare for the assignments ahead?
Final versions should be saved as Word.doc and Powerpoint.ppt and uploaded to the Carmen dropbox on the due date. DON'T FORGET to include a list of works cited (author, title, site) for all borrowed images!

**Composition 2: Rhetorical Analysis --- 25%**

For this assignment, you will compose a rhetorical analysis of a short graphic memoir. You may select from the list provided on this blog or, if you prefer, find an alternative (as long as you clear it with me first). Your purpose here is to analyze (not summarize), interpret, and make claims about the rhetorical strategies you find most important or interesting in your chosen text.

Drawing upon the concepts, angles, and readings we've been using to analyze *Maus* and *Persepolis*, consider how your selected text is designed:

- Who do you think is the implied audience? How can you tell? What kind of relationship does the author set up with the audience?
- What kind of story does the comic offer? How does that story relate to the comic form in general and this style in particular?
- What are the strategies of telling this author chose? (Clarify claims based on analytic evidence.)
- How do you see those strategies working in the text? (Offer specific, detailed evidence.)
- Based on all this analysis, what kind of insights can you offer your audience?
- How might you situate those ideas within larger conversations in research/scholarship or certain community/public spaces?

Building upon these findings, craft an analytic argument about the text’s rhetorical choices and effects—and then back that claim up with specific, clear, and well-organized evidence from the text. Be bold. You know this text now better than me: Show (don’t just tell) me how it works. The final outcome should be a polished, thoughtful 4-5 page analysis of the text that follows accepted conventions of academic discourse. Carefully consider your own rhetorical moves, the choices you make to demonstrate your credibility and intellectual contribution.

In our role as literary critics, that also means correctly documenting all references in MLA style. Papers should be double spaced, use 12-point Times New Roman font, with 1" margins on all sides. Include a single-spaced heading in the top right corner with your name, the course number, instructor’s name, and date. On all pages after the first, include your last name and page number in the top right header.

**Composition 3: Graphic Memoir --- 30%**

Now it’s your turn! This project offers an opportunity to translate your growing rhetorical consciousness from criticism into practice. Based on our critical conversations and growing visual literacies, you will develop a 5-10 page graphic memoir on a topic of your choice. This assignment will consist of 3 parts:

*Proposal*

Your 2-page proposal must contain the following elements, clearly delineated and thoughtfully developed:

- **Description**: Describe the focus of your memoir. What kind of story do you plan to tell? What kind of audience appeal does it have? What makes the story particularly well suited to graphic representation? How do you see it fitting into or expanding the genre as we’ve been examining it in this course?
- **Audience**: Clarifying your target audience will help you understand your rhetorical purpose and strategic choices. To whom might you be telling this story? You might consider this broadly or very specifically; it can be helpful to imagine a particular person as your implied audience, while bearing in mind that your actual audience will be more inclusive. How much background
information do they need? What kind of assumptions might they make? How will you make choices about your story (characters, plot, setting) and telling (narration, cues, construction) based on that audience? How will you influence the audience response in line with your rhetorical purpose?

Composition considerations: Explain your vision of the key elements: what kinds of pictures, images, and verbal texts do you plan to incorporate? Will you “stage” certain shots? If so, when and how? Will you include photos, drawings, letters, or other texts from your past? If so, how will you access them? Do you plan to do much editing in Photoshop? An essential skill for this project will be time management. Think carefully about each step in the process to avoid anxiety later.

Memoir
Bearing in mind the distinction between autobiography and memoir, your 5-10 page comic should focus on a particular event or relationship that you can explore (more or less) fully, rather than try to communicate your whole life in a few pages. NOTE that you should not cover the same territory as in Composition 1. In line with our course theme, I invite you to consider this an exercise in rhetorical storytelling: consider your purpose and audience as you make decisions about your subject and style.

You will create the actual memoir using ComicLife. 5-10 pages is a flexible range: You will each make choices depending on your story and telling strategies. For example, if you want to use classic comic-book pages, you may very well have 9-12 panels per page, which might lead to a shorter final product than if you decide to play with alternative layouts that incorporate only 1-3 panels per page.

Analytic Reflection
This 2-page reflection must contain the following elements, clearly delineated and thoughtfully developed:

Analytical Summary: For this portion, explain the memoir as a rhetorical act of communication. As in any analysis, your primary goal here is to explore not just what happens or why, but how. What are the rhetorical strategies you employed to achieve your particular goal(s) for your target audiences? Be specific. In essence, perform a rhetorical analysis of your own texts as you did for someone else’s in Composition 2.

Critical Reflection: For this section, look back over the process of developing this memoir, from early ideas to final product. What did you learn in the process—about composing, about rhetoric, about memoir, about media...? Can you describe the challenges and rewards of translating rhetorical criticism into practice? How might this assignment influence the way you write and read other kinds of texts?
Chapter 3: Documenting Lives syllabus, Autumn 2009

In an era of reality television, YouTube, Facebook, and the confessional memoir, the practice of "documenting" our own (and, by extension, others') lives has become ubiquitous. Every day we are surrounded by personal lives made public and public issues made personal, all through the power of storytelling. And so, as authors and audiences of these everyday narratives—from personal conversations to political debates, religious sermons to reality shows—we must be critically aware of their persuasive potential in order to participate effectively and ethically in all kinds of communication. Together, we will work to foster our rhetorical consciousness, our capacity to create and critique the discourses that shape our lives and communities.

This course will explore these rhetorical uses of personal stories, how they are constructed and communicated to produce certain effects on their audiences, through the lens of contemporary documentary filmmaking. We will focus primarily on documentaries that double as autobiography or memoir, in which the self and the subject overlap, converge, or are held in tension as part of the overall persuasive purpose. Drawing on various strategies of rhetorical analysis, we will look beneath popular assumptions about documentaries in order to consider how and why they work to influence audience responses to the issues, events, and lives they document. Our explorations will consider what it means to “document” a life in context, to represent the self in relation to society, and to compose these personal/public narratives as rhetorical acts.

This is a writing-intensive course designed to foster your development as active writers and thinkers within your communities. Class readings, discussions, and writing assignments have been designed to build upon the foundation you established in English 110 in order to support more sophisticated rhetorical analysis and practice. You will have the opportunity to practice your skills of critical thinking, careful analysis and interpretation, and developing clear, compelling arguments supported by thoughtful evidence. In addition to several essays and informal writing, you will each produce your own short work of documentary film that you will share with the class. Please note all necessary technological skills will be taught in class; you do not need to be tech-savvy already in order to succeed in this course. All you need is a spirit of exploration, a willingness to ask for help, and faith in your own abilities.

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Learning Objectives:

♦ Students apply basic skills in expository writing
♦ Students demonstrate critical thinking through written and oral expression
♦ Students retrieve and use written information analytically and effectively

Essay 1: Genre(s) Analysis
The goal of this paper is to explore—and work towards your own definition of—the genres of autobiography and documentary in preparation for your later assignments (a rhetorical analysis and your own rhetorical production). These two genres are often treated in isolation; this class puts them into conversation with each other. Your purpose here is to develop a critical lens through which you can view, analyze, interpret, and produce autobiographical documentaries. The final outcome should be a polished, thoughtful 3-4 page examination of these genre: their conventions and innovations; audiences and purposes; and the risks and rewards of combining them into autobiographical documentary.

Questions to consider:
What are the popular/common assumptions about autobiography? About documentary? What are the dominant scholarly/professional definitions? To what extent are these understandings of these genres contested and/or controversial? Given these complexities, what are the issues we should consider when these genres collide?

How have these definitions changed in recent history? How are these changes related to other technological, social, artistic shifts? What techniques have become conventional? Why? What has fallen out of fashion? What’s “hot”? How might these shifts influence our definitions?

What are the rhetorical affordances of autobiography? Of documentary? Of autobiographical documentary? That is, what are the available resources? What are the constraints within which creators must work? What counts as “success” (and by whose standards)? Given these resources, what do you think makes an autobiographical documentary effective, rhetorically speaking?

What are the ethical issues at stake in representing others’ lives, history, communities, etc. through an autobiographical representation of one’s own life? How does these ethical concerns relate back to conversations about definitions? How do such theoretical discussions relate to actual autobiographical documentaries in action?

Helpful Hints:

- You can’t, and shouldn’t, answer all of these questions! After some broad explorations, narrow your focus to an area or topic of particular interest to you—and, ideally, of value to your Essay 2 rhetorical analysis.

- Every good paper has a point, a thesis that makes an argument the rest of the paper works to support through clear organization and strong evidence. In this case, you will be developing your own claim about (some aspect of or angle on) autobiographical documentary as a rhetorical genre. Avoid sweeping generalizations in favor of precise, focused definitions, distinctions, and points of debate.

- While the course readings are obviously a good place to start, I urge you to do outside research as you hone your own focus and argument on an area of particular interest and value to you.

Criteria for evaluation

- To what extent does the essay explore the complexities and debates surrounding autobiography and documentary? Does the essay pose challenging questions rather than simplistic answers?

- Does the essay perform analysis (rather than summary) of these rhetorical genres? To what extent is this analysis useful as a critical lens that will inform your other work in the class?

- Is the essay rhetorically effective? To what extent does it demonstrate logical reasoning and convincing evidence? Is it accessible and engaging for an audience of your peers?

- Is the essay organized in a clear, persuasive structure? Does it maintain focused direction and momentum throughout? Are the introduction and conclusion used effectively to persuade your reader of the value and validity of your claims?

- Is the essay free from grammatical and syntactical errors? Does it follow MLA formatting and citation standards?

Essay 2: Rhetorical Analysis

The goal of this paper is to apply the tools of rhetorical analysis and your theoretical understanding from Essay 1 to an autobiographical documentary of your choosing, either from pre-approved list or after discussing your choice with me. Your purpose here is to analyze (not summarize), interpret, and make claims about the rhetorical strategies you find most important or interesting in your chosen film. The final outcome should be a polished, thoughtful 3-5 page analysis of the rhetorical context(s), audience(s), strategies, and effectiveness of your selected film.

Questions to consider:

- How does this film work to influence audiences? What are its persuasive goals and strategies? What rhetorical resources does this film rely on? How do these strategies work together (or against each other)?
What’s the relationship between the story and the telling? What choices does the filmmaker make in terms of voices, views, cues, and construction that shape the story into a persuasive (or not!) text?

What relationship(s) are developed among the filmmaker, subjects (self and others), and audiences? What kind of ethos does the film attempt to convey? What assumptions does it make about the audience’s knowledge or values? What kind of evidence does it offer to support its (implicit or explicit) claims?

How can you understand the film’s rhetorical strategies in terms of its context(s), audience(s), and purpose(s)? What can the response of actual audiences reveal about the effectiveness of these choices?

How does this film fit (or not) into the conversations we’ve been having about autobiographical documentary as a genre? How do the strategies of representation, and their ethical issues, relate to the doc’s rhetorical goals? How can you use your understanding of the genre in order to analyze this particular example?

Helpful Hints:

• You can’t, and shouldn’t, answer all of these questions! After some broad explorations, narrow your focus to one or two strategies of particular interest to you—and, ideally, of value as you develop your own documentary.

• Remember to play with your readerly roles. Trace your subjective responses to their causes (within the text or yourself); resist the urge to categorize things as “good or bad” or to simply “agree or disagree.” Consider the filmmakers’ goals and choices from their perspective and the perspective of the authorial audience. Step back to assess these moves as a detached critic.

• Assume that your audience has seen the film, but only for entertainment purposes. YOU ARE THE EXPERT! What analytic insights can you offer to deepen your audience’s understanding about how this doc works rhetorically?

• Every good paper has a point, a thesis that makes an argument the rest of the paper works to support through clear organization and strong evidence. In this case, you will be developing your own claim about (some aspect of or angle on) how this particular documentary works rhetorically in the real world. Avoid sweeping generalizations in favor of precise, focused claims and persuasive evidence.

Criteria for evaluation: A strong essay will…

• Ask compelling questions and try to answer them in provocative ways.

• Analyze (not summarize) the message conveyed by the selected documentary. Explore how the message is conveyed.

• Discuss to whom the message is conveyed and speculate about the effectiveness of this message for a specific audience.

• Develop a complex and interesting thesis argument about how this documentary communicates its messages to audiences.

• Integrate secondary sources in a way that accounts for aspects of the conversations that are relevant to the paper’s thesis.

• Introduce complicating evidence and integrate it in such a way as to attempt to include an evolving thesis.

• Explain why the way the message is conveyed is important, and discuss how your analysis participates in the larger conversations about autobiography and documentary rhetorics.

• Contain a title on the first page that reflects the complexity of the paper’s general purposes.

• Include an appropriately formatted Works Cited page using MLA guidelines for all primary and secondary sources.

• Contain few sentence-level errors and few lapses in tone. Follow academic conventions discussed in class.
Digital Documentary Project

Now it’s your turn! This project offers an opportunity to translate your growing rhetorical understanding from criticism into practice. Building upon your explorations of the autobiographical documentary genre, you will propose, compose, and analyze a documentary of your own creation. From conception to presentation, this film will reflect your own distinctive rhetorical and autobiographical vision—whether your story is about your life or about an issue you’re exploring through your own experience/perspective. In line with our course theme, I invite you to consider this as an exercise in storytelling; craft a rhetorical narrative that has a point and purpose for your chosen audience. And of course, bear in mind the ethical, rhetorical, and practical considerations we’ve been discussing all quarter. Finally, remember that your documentary will be only 3-5 minutes long, and you have a tight timeline; be sure to consider these factors as you develop your project. Your documentary will be most successful if you mix creativity and imagination with healthy realism and resourcefulness.

Criteria for evaluation

Think of this project as another kind of writing—the criteria for evaluation are remarkably similar to those for any composition. A strong documentary will…

- Ask compelling questions and try to answer them in provocative ways.
- Pay careful attention to the audience and purpose, and use those considerations to make conscious rhetorical choices.
- Acknowledge and negotiate your own subjective position/perspective while respecting others’.
- Develop a complex and interesting point/argument about this topic and why it matters to the audience.
- Provide compelling evidence (interviews, other sources, diverse media) to develop and complicate your argument.
- Arrange and present information in a logical and appealing structure.
- Have a title that reflects the documentary’s theme and inspires interest.
- Abide by all copyright and fair use laws; use only legal materials and provide appropriate references.
- Demonstrate careful editing and final polishing.

Proposal

Your proposal must contain the following sections, clearly delineated and fully explained:

- Description: Imagine this as your “pitch,” where you argue that this project is worth investing in. Describe the area of focus for your film, complete with background research (from both your own experience and outside sources). What historical and contemporary issues and perspectives will you need to consider? What is the anticipated scope of your contribution to these conversations? You should recognize the resources and constraints of the project: deadline, length, access, etc. Your goal here is to familiarize your audience (for the proposal, that’s me) with the topic, to construct your own ethos as knowledgeable about the topic and rhetorically aware of your composition plans. Be detailed and descriptive.

- Audience: Clarifying your target audience will help you understand your rhetorical purpose and strategies. To whom will you be telling this story? Discuss your audience(s)’ relationship to the subject matter: How much do they already know? What kinds of assumptions might they make? What kinds of appeals will be most effective? What mood, tone, style, media will best engage and persuade your selected audience?

- Technical Considerations: Explain your vision of the key elements: What spaces, scenes, and/or players will be involved? How far in advance will you need to plan your shoots? What mode(s) of documentary will you be working in? What kinds of media do you plan to integrate with your own video footage?

- Timeline: An essential skill for this project will be time management. Set up a specific outline of dates for research, filming, gathering media, and editing.
Digital documentary video
Your final product will be a coherent, credible, and conscious 3-5 minute short autobiographical documentary designed with rhetorical care. It will be screened for the class and submitted as a .mov file on DVD.

Analytic reflection
In this 2-3 page paper you are asked to reflect critically upon the documentary process you have just completed and provide an analytical summary of the final film. As with all of our papers, aim to make specific claims and support them with evidence and logic. There should be two sections:

Analytical Summary: For this portion, explain the film’s message and how the film conveys this message. As in any analysis, your primary goal here is to explore not just what happens or why, but how. What are the rhetorical strategies you employed to achieve your particular goal(s) for your target audiences? For example, you might focus on how the film’s structure and sequence were the prime factors in communicating your message effectively, or how the film strategically appeals to certain emotions or attempts to establish your ethos as the source/creator. In essence, perform a rhetorical analysis of your own documentary as you did for someone else’s in Essay 2; I suggest reviewing that assignment’s prompts.

Critical Reflection: For this portion, look back over the process of developing your documentary from early ideas to final product. What did you learn in the process—about composing in different media, about autobiography and/or documentary as genres, about translating rhetorical analysis into rhetorical action? What specific parts or points were most illuminating, frustrating, rewarding?

Note: This is not the space to bullsh*t your instructor; it’s an opportunity to take a step back and think seriously about everything you accomplished in the last 5 weeks—and how you can apply those experiences outside of class.
Chapter 4: Narrating Literacies Syllabus, Winter 2010

In this course we will explore what it means to be literate in the digital age—What kinds of strategies and skills do authors and audiences need to engage effectively in contemporary communication?—as we expand our own digital literacies.

Together, we will work to foster our rhetorical consciousness, our capacity to create and critique the discourses that shape our lives and communities. In particular, we will focus on the genre(s) of narrative, the persuasive stories that surround and influence us on a daily basis. This emphasis on storytelling will serve as a unifying lens through which we will examine the vast, complex realm of digital communication.

The course will help you to better understand the principles of rhetorical design, to critically analyze digital texts of various kinds, and to plan and create your own rhetorical compositions. You will gain hands-on experience with digital publishing platforms like blogs, wikis, and YouTube as well as composing software like Photoshop, ComicLife, and iMovie. Course assignments will include analyzing digital media texts based on our theoretical discussions and producing a series of short digital media compositions: your own blog, a visual argument, and a video literacy narrative designed for public audiences.

Please note all necessary technological skills will be taught in class; you do not need to be tech-savvy already in order to succeed in this course. All you need is a spirit of exploration, a willingness to ask for help, and faith in your own problem-solving skills.

GEC Requirement: Category 2.C(2) Arts and Humanities, Visual/Performing Arts

Goals/Rationale: Students evaluate significant writing and works of art. Such studies develop capacities for aesthetic and historical response and judgment; interpretation and evaluation; critical listening, reading, seeing, thinking and writing; and experiencing the arts and reflecting on that experience.

♦ Students develop abilities to be informed observers or active participants in the visual spatial, performing, spoken, or literary arts.
♦ Students describe and interpret creative work, and/or movements in the arts and literature.
♦ Students explain how works of art and writings explore the human condition.

Composition 1: Blog Portfolio — 20%

You will design and maintain your own personal blog on WordPress; these blogs will all be linked through the course hub site. Your blog will be a space for self-representation, exploration, and conversation, as well as for workshopping other assignments.

Blog Design & Maintenance
This blog is a dynamic, rhetorical representation of your participation in the class. Select and customize the theme, layout, and mood of your blog. Develop a blogroll of sites you find relevant for your audience. Create tags and categories that help organize your ideas.

Regular Posting
You must compose a minimum of one (250+ words) post and contribute two (100+ words) comments on your peers’ blogs each week. This amounts to at least 10 posts and 20 comments over the course of the quarter. NB: These posts are in addition to the specific assignments you will share via the blog.

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Introductory Post: Technology Autobiography

In this initial post, your task is to introduce yourself to your blog community—in this case, your classmates. We will all be expanding our digital literacies together, and this essay provides a sense of your relationship with technology to date. Consider the following prompts:

- Recall your earliest experiences with technological devices or artifacts. What were they? What do you remember about using them? What were the popular gadgets in your house while you were growing up?
- When do you remember beginning to work/play with computers? What kinds of experiences have you had with computers in school? at home? How would you describe your relationship with your computer?
- What technologies are on your desk at home? What are you carrying now? What would you be lost without? With what do you feel least comfortable? What gadgets are you lusting for?
- What does it mean to be technologically literate? Whom do you identify as being most technologically “literate” in your life? How does your technological literacy measure up to others’?
- How do you expect to deal with new technologies in the future? What advantages and problems do you see with the way you approach technology? What is your preferred way of learning new technologies?
- Don’t try to answer all of these questions, and don’t feel like you need to directly answer any of them. Use them to generate some ideas about your personal relationship with technology

Workshopping drafts

Composition 2: Visual argument — 25%

The goal of this visual composition is to communicate a compelling visual argument about some aspect of literacy in the digital age. We will be defining literacy broadly, as facility in “composing” or “decoding” communicative media of all kinds, and you are encouraged to explore any related topic that interests, angers, or inspires you. You may choose to compose either:

- Photo essay, consisting of 4-6 images in a slideshow presentation. Any captions must be no more than 25 words each.
- Comic, consisting of 1-2 pages. Any alphabetic text must be no more than 25 words per page.

Either way, you must incorporate a photo taken by yourself, a photo of yourself, and a photo by someone else that you have manipulated in Photoshop.

This assignment will include:

1. Proposal (posted to your blog by Monday, February 1) in which you consider 2 possible topics and approaches. This proposal should include sections on
   o Your rhetorical situation: context, audience(s), purpose
   o Your rhetorical narrative: what’s the story and how will you tell it
   o Your rhetorical resources: the affordances and constraints of a photo essay
2. Draft (posted to your blog by Wednesday, February 3) for workshopping
3. Final (posted to your blog by Wednesday, February 10) composition that responds to feedback received via the blog and in-class workshops.
Composition 3: Video literacy narrative — 35%

This project offers an opportunity to explore your own experiences with and understandings of literacy in the digital age—and to translate those explorations into a rhetorical composition designed for public audiences. The goal of this assignment is to create an autobiographical contribution to digital conversations about literacies in everyday life. NOTE that entering pre-existing conversations means getting informed about what other people are saying about and doing with literacies and then developing your own narratives as part of that dialogue. The final product will be a (no more than) 5 minute video designed for the DALN or another digital space. This narrative may focus on any aspect of your past, present, or future as a literacy learner and user, but it has to meet the following requirements:

- Working with a group, you will develop an over-arching concept or theme that each of you will explore in your individual pieces. The collection must be unified by a set of agreed-upon criteria. Your group work, therefore, will be to develop an approach, an “angle” that each of you feels comfortable working within, and then to develop design elements that will provide some continuity and connection among the individual pieces.
- You will develop and present individual proposals that contain the following elements:
  - Your rhetorical situation: the conversations and audience(s) you will be engaging as well as your purpose
  - Your rhetorical narrative: what’s the story and how will you tell it?
  - Your rhetorical resources: the affordances and constraints of a digital video composition. Note that this must include attention to your individual situations: What technologies will you be using? How will you access them? What pre-planning will be necessary? How will you budget your time?

Each proposal should be at least 500 words, and will be posted to your blogs for feedback from the class by Wednesday, February 24.

- Each literacy narrative must incorporate the following elements:
  - 2 of the following:
    - Your blog
    - Your visual argument (composition 2)
    - two DALN submissions
    - your own literacy narrative interview
  - original video
  - original and manipulated images
  - alphabetic text
  - audio track

You are at liberty to incorporate any portion of these elements in whatever shape or form you find effective in telling your story. For example, you might crop just a portion of an image, cut audio soundbites, include a passage from a blog post as part of your narration, etc. The goal is to be creative and compelling through remixing a variety of text types into an entirely new creation. The ways you choose to include these elements may very well form a part of your group’s unifying principles. NOTE that because we will be publishing these texts, you must have documented permission to use any and all elements.
Micro-compositions — 10%

In-class exercises; collaborative compositions, informal reading responses; etc.

Participation — 10%

Preparation; active participation in discussion; conscientious and productive workshopping; contributions to a supportive and challenging learning environment.

Required texts and materials

- “Readings” on Carmen and/or course blog
- Accounts on WordPress, YouTube, and Google
- External hard drive (formatted for Macs) or large jump/USB drive for transporting drafts, files, etc. to and from class. Because you will be transporting your digital files in this way, you will need one with at least 16 GB of memory.
- One or 2 mini-DV tapes for recording video
- At least 5 blank DVDs for sharing drafts and submitting final projects
- Headphones (on select days)
Chapter 2: Illustrating Lives
Situated Practice Survey

### Illustrating Lives Situated Practice

#### 1. Introduction

1. What kinds of texts do you think have the power to influence the way people (like you) think and/or act?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text Type</th>
<th>Highly Influential</th>
<th>Influential</th>
<th>Somewhat Influential</th>
<th>Marginally Influential</th>
<th>Not at All Influential</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal experiences</td>
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<td>Blogs</td>
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<td>Expert testimony</td>
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<td>Talk shows</td>
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<td>Print journalism</td>
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<td>Marketing and advertisements</td>
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<td>Memoir and autobiography</td>
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<td>Essays</td>
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<td>Conversations with family and friends</td>
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<td>Speeches and debates</td>
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<td>Television/movie news programming</td>
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<td>Art</td>
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<td>Music</td>
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<td>Social networking sites (like Facebook, Twitter, etc.)</td>
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<td>Fictional films</td>
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<td>Non-fiction film</td>
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<td>YouTube</td>
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<td>Public opinion polls</td>
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<td>Reality television programming</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
2. What kinds of "texts" do you most often use to communicate your own beliefs, explain your choices, or influence other people's beliefs or actions?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text Type</th>
<th>All the Time</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Fairly regularly</th>
<th>Once in a while</th>
<th>Never</th>
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<tr>
<td>Face-to-face conversation</td>
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<td>Poetry</td>
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<td>Music</td>
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<td>Letter to editor</td>
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<td>Appearance (clothes, hair, etc.)</td>
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<td>Photography</td>
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<td>Text messages</td>
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<td>Video</td>
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<td>Email</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fiction</td>
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<td>Creative non-fiction</td>
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<tr>
<td>Blog</td>
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<td>Fliers/brochures</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research paper</td>
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<td>Photos to social network sites</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Facebook, Twitter, etc.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Artwork</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
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</table>

3. Why do you think nonfiction genres (from biography to documentary to reality television) are so prevalent in American culture right now?

2. Memoir

1. What word(s) come to mind when you hear the word "memoir"? What about "personal narrative"?

2. What word(s) come to mind when you hear the word "comic"? What about "graphic art"?
Illustrating Lives Situated Practice

3. In what ways do you think someone’s personal/life story can influence the way other people think and act?

4. Have you ever:

- read comics
- drawn comics
- read a memoir
- written a memoir
- taken digital photographs
- edited digital photographs
- composed a photo essay/slideshow
- used photo editing software (like Photoshop)
- used comic-creation software (like ComicLife)
- Explain

3. Educational experiences

1. Throughout your education, how often have you been asked to produce the following kinds of personal writings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Writing</th>
<th>In many classes and situations</th>
<th>More than once a year</th>
<th>Every year or so</th>
<th>Infrequently</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal statement (for applications)</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal narrative essay</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal/narrative writing</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
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<tr>
<td>Autobiography or memoir</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
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<tr>
<td>Multimedia/digital storytelling</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Comments:
Illustrating Lives Situated Practice

2. Have you heard the phrase "visual literacy"? How might you define it? To what extent do you think it's important in everyday life?

3. What kinds of ideas and skills do you think an advanced composition course (like this one) should focus on? What are your concerns about this course? How can I help you?
Illustrating Lives Transformed Practice

1. Final survey

* 1. To what extent did our course readings, activities, and discussions influence the way you think about rhetoric in general, both how you respond to others' texts and/or how you compose your own?

* 2. To what extent do you think autobiographical compositions can influence the way their audiences think and/or act? What kinds/genres do you think have most rhetorical potential? Why?

* 3. To what extent has this course's readings, discussions, and assignments influenced your perspective on "academic discourse"?
## Illustrating Lives Transformed Practice

*4. What concepts and themes have you found helpful in your analysis of OTHERS' autobiographical compositions?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept/Theme</th>
<th>Helpful</th>
<th>Somewhat helpful</th>
<th>Not helpful</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Author-audience relationships</td>
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<tr>
<td>Context</td>
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<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
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<tr>
<td>Appeals (logos, ethos, pathos)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Memoir as genre</td>
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<tr>
<td>Comics as medium</td>
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<tr>
<td>Affordances (resources and constraints)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Frames and garters</td>
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<tr>
<td>Closure</td>
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<td>Story</td>
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<tr>
<td>Character</td>
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<td>Setting</td>
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<td>Plot</td>
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<tr>
<td>Progression</td>
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<tr>
<td>Narrator/storyteller</td>
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<tr>
<td>Narration: Voices</td>
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<td>Narration: Views</td>
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<td>Cuts</td>
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<td>Construction</td>
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<td>Ethica</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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**5. What concepts and themes have you found helpful in creating YOUR OWN autobiographical compositions?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Helpful</th>
<th>Somewhat helpful</th>
<th>Not helpful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Author-audience relationships</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apparatus (legos, etches, pathos)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentor as genre</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comics as medium</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affordances (resources and constraints)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frames and gutters</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Color</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Story</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Character</td>
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<tr>
<td>Setting</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Plot</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progression</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrator/narrative</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrator: Voices</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Narrator: Views</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Guts</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Other (please specify):**

---

**6. Would you consider sharing your autobiographical compositions with others? Who? Why?**

**Who?**

**Why?**
**Illustrating Lives Transformed Practice**

7. Through what kinds of venues would you consider sharing these compositions?

- [ ] In person to family and friends
- [ ] Via email to family and friends
- [ ] Facebook or other social networking site
- [ ] YouTube
- [ ] Blog
- [ ] Print or online publication (journal or magazine)

Other (please specify)

![Redaction]  

8. **BEFORE** this class, how often had you:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>All the time</th>
<th>Once in a while</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contributed to a blog</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Took digital photographs</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☒</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edited digital photographs</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read comics</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Created comics</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read memoir</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☒</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composed memoir</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyzed others’ compositions</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyzed your own compositions</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Which of these do you think you'll do in the future?

![Redaction]

9. Do you consider yourself visually literate? To what extent has this class influenced your perspective on this question?

![Redaction]
Chapter 3: Documenting Lives
Situated Practice Survey

### Documenting Lives Situated Practice

#### 1. Introduction

1. What kinds of texts do you think have the power to influence the way people (like you) think and/or act?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Texts</th>
<th>Highly influential</th>
<th>Influential</th>
<th>Somewhat influential</th>
<th>Barely influential</th>
<th>Not at all influential</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal experiences</td>
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<td>☐</td>
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<td>☐</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Print journalism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Essays</td>
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<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-fiction film</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reality television programming</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social networking sites (like Facebook, Twitter, etc.)</td>
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<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public opinion polls</td>
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<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speeches and debates</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expert testimony</td>
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<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversations with family and friends</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YouTube</td>
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<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fictional films</td>
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<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memoir and autobiography</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogs</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television/radio news programming</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing and advertisements</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk shows</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Documenting Lives Situated Practice

2. What kinds of "texts" do you most often use to communicate your own beliefs, explain your choices, or influence other people's beliefs or actions?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All the time</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Fairly regularly</th>
<th>Once in a while</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blog</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Films/lectures</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text messages</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Letter to editor</td>
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<td>Fiction</td>
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<td>Music</td>
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<tr>
<td>Email</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posts to social network sites (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poetry</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Photography</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative non-fiction</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research paper</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Appearance (clothes, hair, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Face-to-face conversation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Video</td>
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<tr>
<td>Artwork</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Autobiography and rhetoric

1. What word(s) come to mind when you hear the word "autobiography" or "memoir"? What about "personal narrative"?

2. Have you ever told a story a particular way to get someone to respond a certain way?

- [ ] Sure, all the time.
- [ ] Somewhat regularly.
- [ ] Once in a while.
- [ ] Not that I know of.
### Documenting Lives Situated Practice

3. Can you think of time when you've been influenced by a story about someone else's life experiences?
- [ ] Sure, all the time.
- [ ] Somewhat regularly.
- [ ] Once in a while.
- [ ] Not that I know of.

4. In what ways do you think someone's personal/life story can influence the way other people think and act?

### 3. Educational experiences

1. Throughout your education, how often have you been asked to produce the following kinds of personal writing:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kind of Writing</th>
<th>In many classes and situations</th>
<th>More than once a year</th>
<th>Every year or so</th>
<th>Infrequently</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal statement for applications</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal narrative essay</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>☒</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal/ informal writing</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>☒</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autobiography or memoir</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>☒</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multimedia/digital storytelling</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>☒</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative nonfiction</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>☒</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comments:

2. How were these assignments explained/justified and evaluated?

3. What concepts or themes did you find most helpful during these writing experiences?

- [ ] Plot incidents
- [ ] Setting
- [ ] Self-presentation
- [ ] Style
- [ ] Point of View
- [ ] Voice(s)
- [ ] Context
- [ ] Audience
- [ ] Chronology/time
- [ ] Representation of others
- [ ] Purpose
- [ ] Events/organization
- [ ] Characters
- [ ] Point of action
- [ ] Events/organization
4. What did these assignments teach you about autobiographical writing? To what extent did they influence how you respond to others' stories and/or how you tell your own?
### Documenting Lives Transformed Practice

#### 1. Final survey

**1. What concepts and themes have you found helpful in your analysis of OTHERS' autobiographical compositions?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Helpful</th>
<th>Somewhat helpful</th>
<th>Not helpful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Author-audience relationships</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reader's role (actual, authority, critical)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual and implied author</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual and implied audience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affordances (resources and constraints)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appara (beggs, eshes, patros)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documentary as genre</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autobiography as genre</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documentary mode</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Voice</td>
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<tr>
<td>Story</td>
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<tr>
<td>Character</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Plot</td>
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<tr>
<td>Setting/place</td>
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<tr>
<td>Narrator/protagonist</td>
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<td>Voice</td>
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<td>Views</td>
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<td>Tone</td>
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<tr>
<td>Order (chronological)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics of representation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Please specify any other concepts or themes that were helpful.*
**Documenting Lives Transformed Practice**

**2. What concepts and themes have you found helpful in creating YOUR OWN autobiographical compositions?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Helpful</th>
<th>Somewhat helpful</th>
<th>Not helpful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Author-audience relationship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reader's roles (actual, authorial, critical)</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Actual and implied author</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual and implied audience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Media</td>
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<tr>
<td>Affordances (resources and constraints)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Appearance (logic, ethos, pathos)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documentary as genre</td>
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<td>Autobiography as genre</td>
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<td>Documentary mode</td>
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<tr>
<td>Story</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Character</td>
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<tr>
<td>Plot</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting/place</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Narrator/narratanteller</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voices</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Views</td>
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<td>Curve</td>
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<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Order (chronology/time)</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics of representation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**3. Would you consider sharing your autobiographical compositions with others? Who? Why?**

*Please provide your answer here.*
4. Through what kinds of venues would you consider sharing these compositions?

- In person to family and friends
- Via email to family and friends
- Facebook or other social networking site
- YouTube
- Blog
- Print or online publication (journal or magazine)

Other (please specify)

5. To what extent did our course readings, activities, and discussions influence the way you think about rhetoric in general, both how you respond to others’ texts and/or how you compose your own?

6. To what extent has this course’s readings, discussions, and assignments influenced your perspective on autobiographical compositions in particular?

7. To what extent do you think autobiographical compositions can influence the way their audiences think and/or act? In what contexts?

8. What kinds/genres of autobiographical composition do you think have most rhetorical potential in contemporary contexts? Why?

9. What kind of potential do you think autobiographical compositions hold for communication in public contexts? How are they being used now? How might they be used?
10. What advice would you offer to someone teaching this course? to someone taking it?
### 1. What kinds of texts do you think have the power to influence the way people (like you) think and/or act?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Highly influential</th>
<th>Influential</th>
<th>Somewhat influential</th>
<th>Rarely influential</th>
<th>Not at all influential</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-fiction film</td>
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<td>Conversations with family</td>
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<td>and friends</td>
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<td>Talk shows</td>
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<td>Fictitious films</td>
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<td>Art</td>
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<td>Print journalism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Speeches and debates</td>
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<td>Marketing and advertisements</td>
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<td>Reality television</td>
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<td>programming</td>
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<td>Public opinion polls</td>
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<td>YouTube</td>
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<td>Personal experiences</td>
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<td>Blogs</td>
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<td>Music</td>
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<tr>
<td>Expert testimony</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social networking sites</td>
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<tr>
<td>(like Facebook, Twitter, etc.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Television/radio news</td>
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<tr>
<td>programming</td>
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<tr>
<td>Memoir and autobiography</td>
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<tr>
<td>Essays</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### Narrating Literacies Situated Practice

2. What kinds of “texts” do you most often use to communicate your own beliefs, explain your choices, or influence other people’s beliefs or actions?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text Type</th>
<th>All the Time</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Fairly Regularly</th>
<th>Once in a While</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Photography</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poetry</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fiction</td>
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<tr>
<td>Text messages</td>
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<tr>
<td>Artwork</td>
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<tr>
<td>Letter to editor</td>
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<td>Email</td>
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<tr>
<td>Appearance (clothes, hair, etc.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Posts to social network sites</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Facebook, Twitter, etc.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Music</td>
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<tr>
<td>Video</td>
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<tr>
<td>Films/lectures</td>
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<td>Face-to-face conversation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research paper</td>
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<tr>
<td>Blog</td>
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<tr>
<td>Creative non-fiction</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### 2. Autobiography and Rhetoric

1. What word(s) come to mind when you hear the word “autobiography” or “memoir”? What about “personal narrative”?

2. Have you ever told a story a particular way to get someone to respond in a certain way?

- [ ] Sure, all the time.
- [ ] Somewhat regularly.
- [ ] Once in a while.
- [ ] Not that I know of.
### Narrating Literacies Situated Practice

3. Can you think of time when you've been influenced by a story about someone else's life experiences?

- [ ] Sure, all the time.
- [ ] Somewhat regularly.
- [ ] Once in a while.
- [ ] Not that I know of.

4. In what ways do you think someone's personal/life story can influence the way other people think and act?

### 3. Educational experiences

1. Throughout your education, how often have you been asked to produce the following kinds of personal writing:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kind of Writing</th>
<th>In many classes and situations</th>
<th>More than once a year</th>
<th>Every year or so</th>
<th>Infrequently</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal statement (for applications)</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal narrative essay</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
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<tr>
<td>Journal/ informal writing</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autobiography or memoir</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multimedia/digital storytelling</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
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<tr>
<td>Creative nonfiction</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comments:

2. How were those assignments explained/justified and evaluated?

3. What concepts or themes did you find most helpful during these writing experiences?

- [ ] Audience
- [ ] Context
- [ ] Style
- [ ] Points/thesis
- [ ] Point of view
- [ ] Representor of others
- [ ] Reader(s)
- [ ] Purpose
- [ ] Hope/idea
- [ ] Characters
- [ ] Setting
- [ ] Event/organization
- [ ] Chronology/time
- [ ] Self-presentation
Narrating Literacies Situated Practice

4. What did these assignments teach you about autobiographical writing? To what extent did they influence how you respond to others’ stories and/or how you tell your own?
Transformed Practice

### Narrating Literacies Transformed Practice

#### 1. BEFORE this class, how often had you:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>All the time</th>
<th>Regularly</th>
<th>Once in a while</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contributed to a blog</td>
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<tr>
<td>Commented on a blog</td>
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<tr>
<td>Taken digital photographs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Edited digital photographs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Watched videos on public sites</td>
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<tr>
<td>Used a video camera</td>
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<tr>
<td>Edited video</td>
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<tr>
<td>Posted videos on public sites</td>
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<tr>
<td>Read wiki pages</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contributed to wiki pages</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

#### 2. AFTER this class, how likely are you to continue or expand your use of:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tool/Technique</th>
<th>I'm definitely planning to use this again</th>
<th>I think I'll want to use it in the future</th>
<th>I'll never teach it again</th>
<th>I'm not sure</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ComicLife</td>
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<td>Screen capture (still or video)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Googledocs (or other collaborative tools)</td>
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<tr>
<td>iMovie (or similar software)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Creative Commons</td>
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<tr>
<td>DALN</td>
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<td>Prezi</td>
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<td>Photoshop (or similar software)</td>
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<td>Dragos</td>
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<tr>
<td>File conversion sites/software</td>
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<td>Other (please specify)</td>
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</table>
3. Which exercises in this class do you think offered you the most useful literacy skills or insights? (select all that apply)

- Blog setup and design
- Composing blog posts with multiple media
- Commenting on others’ drafts and posts
- Technological autobiography
- Illustrating your tech autobiography
- Photo editing
- Capturing
- Creating a comic
- Concept in 3D
- Literacy interview
- Group collaboration
- Video editing
- Literacy narrative
- Navigating the DALN

2.

1. What moment(s) stand out in your memory of this class?

2. What are your thoughts on the DALN? How would you describe your experience contributing that archive?

3. What’s your take on our conversations about college, education, literacies, and "real life"? How do you see your own views on education in relation to the points raised by your classmates?
<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Narrating Literacies Transformed Practice</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. When I'm writing about our experiences in this class, what do you think I should include or focus on?</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. What message(s) would you like me to pass on to other college composition teachers?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>