

# ARTful Narratives: Arts-Based Methods in Composition Courses

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**Abstract** This article explains how arts-based pedagogy enhanced undergraduate students' personal narratives so that they could write from their authority of experience, deviate from academic writing standards, and authentically express themselves.

**Keywords** *Narrative, Art Practice, Creative Education, Reflective Practice, Revising Curriculum, Literacy*

## **Introduction**

When I left secondary education to teach postsecondary writing courses, I was provided with far more freedom in how I could instruct students. No longer did I have lists of standards I had to link to every activity. I was especially excited that my courses could begin, as many undergraduate writing courses do, with a personal narrative assignment. There are many reasons why Composition instructors assign personal narratives at the beginning of the semester. They are transgressive pedagogy because they “disrupt the atmosphere” that previous rigid writing instruction creates and allow for “pleasure in the classroom” (hooks, 1994, p. 7). Narrative writing in Composition courses allows for student choice of topic, speaking on their authority of experience, and expression of emotions through thoughtful reflection. Additionally, positioning it as an early assignment within a semester’s curriculum opens possibilities for critical thinking for student writers that can extend to other types of writing assignments (Crowe, 2008). With this understanding of narrative writing in mind, I assigned the personal narrative zealously, excited for the possibility of what I might read from my students when they were finally allowed to tell their stories without academic rules. But after a few semesters,

I considered scrapping the personal narrative assignment altogether. The papers were typically mechanical, lacking in detail, rushed, and devoid of emotional expression. My students dreaded writing them and I no longer looked forward to reading them. Why were they not writing the stories personal narrative assignments allow for? After thoughtful reflection, I realized that I needed to significantly revise my curriculum because it was not generating the results I hoped. This article explains how arts-based curriculum enhanced students' personal narratives so that they could write from their authority of experience, deviate from academic writing standards, and authentically express themselves.

### **Composition and art-making**

Though some scholars have historically thought personal narrative assignments to be “self-indulgent” and “irrelevant” (Hindman, 2003, p. 11), others see that narrative writing facilitates students' understanding of composition by actively engaging students in the writing process through their personal connections. Once learning is connected to personal experiences, narrative writing can promote critical thinking through analysis of experiences (Kimball, Schnee, & Schwabe, 2015) and the blending of genres (Spiegelman, 2004). By allowing students to draw from their own lives as primary resources, Nash (2004) explains that narrative writing opens space for diverse, authentic voices. A great deal of narrative writing instruction relies on students conveying their experiences through alphabetic text or digital methods, both of which are limiting for students. Davilia (2017) addresses how assignments that rely on students' mastery of alphabetic text, position the instructor as the enforcer of “white, middle class norms” (p. 164) because they are looking for one way of knowing or reasoning based on white perceptions of clarity in writing. The result is that students' ways of knowing that cannot be effectively depicted with alphabetic text are censored, limited, or excluded completely. Some Composition instructors view digital technologies as a way to open spaces for students' diverse ways of knowing, but digital technologies expect students to effectively navigate technological systems they may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable with in order to convey their ways of knowing (Shipka, 2013), thus again, limiting students' stories to what instructors allow them to compose. In my own practice, I thought that allowing openness

of topic selection and writing style with alphabetic text was enough to generate personal narratives that reflected depth of lived experiences, but instead, my curriculum was not open enough to allow for diverse ways of knowing.

hooks (1995) explains that “[t]he appeal to experience is central for all claims of authenticity” (p. 12), and curriculum must allow for students to showcase their experiences in diverse ways. It took me years to consider using art-making in my Composition courses because “[t]he belief that the arts are intellectually undemanding occupations suitable for amusement and diversion [. . .] is deeply ingrained in the Western psyche” (Efland, 2002). I had few experiences of getting to make art after elementary school and never saw it modeled as a curricular method for major writing assignments. As I began to research the connections between composition and art, I found that art was once the dominant and largely accessible form of preserving and communicating ideas, while alphabetic text was used to provide more insight into the artistic products (Hobson, 1998). I also found that there are many Compositionists who see alphabetic writing as “*one way of knowing*,” not “*the way*” (Dunn, 2001, p. 15). Compositionists such as Golden (1986), Berthoff (1981), Palmeri (2012), Shipka (2013), Dunnigan (2019), and Hanzalik & Virgintino (2019) all recognize benefits in using art-making in the writing classroom, including; opening spaces for diverse literacy practices, teaching students composition processes, aiding in imagery, helping students discover relationships through metaphor, and facilitating critical thinking through playing with ideas.

Scholars of Creativity and Curriculum Studies also see potential for art-making in educational settings, stating that creativity is “a form of self-education” that allows for dynamic exploration of the aesthetic and conceptual concerns (Harris, 2014). Creative acts like art-making allow people to explore how things fit together and relate to each other. As Kent & Steward (2008) explain, “To create means to relate” (p. 4). Throughout history, the arts have been used as a form of reality construction (Efland, Freedman, & Stuhr, 1996), but it is also where transcendence from course content can occur and have “a wide-ranging transformative impact” (hooks, 1995). As I learned more of art-making

as a curricular method, I began to see that, like Greene (2001), I wanted education to be “the process of enabling persons to become different, to enter the multiple provinces of meaning that create perspectives on the works”, but the way I assigned the personal narrative did not allow this type of education to occur. hooks (1994) points out that as educators, “[w]e must acknowledge that our styles of teaching may need to change” (p. 35) because we often teach in the style of how we were taught, which may not be effective. It was time for me to revise my curriculum in a style of how I wish I could have learned writing instead of what I was accustomed to.

## **Curricular Revision**

### **Theoretical Understanding**

The type of personal narrative I assign my students is a literacy narrative, asking students to create narratives explaining how; they became literate, are working on achieving literacy, or failed to achieve literacy in a topic. Although I always permit a wide range of literacy topics that span literacies of emotions, ideas, and interests, students previously selected external topics that they did not seem to have deep feelings towards. When reviewing my assignment prompt, I considered how restrictive it was for students. I was asking for students to showcase their knowledge in one way, through alphabetic text, which limited how they could tell their stories of literacy. Additionally, by restricting how students told their stories, my curriculum was promoting passive learning, where students went through the motions of what they thought was required for an assignment without thinking critically. My assignment was not teaching new ways of “seeing, knowing, and doing” (Bean, 2011, p. 2). Although narrative writing disrupts the “default thinking about writing in school” with “thesis, argument, elucidation, claim,” and so on, being open with topics is not enough to disrupt the “logical movement of the mind” (Romano, 2013, p. 11) academic writing typically attempts to instill; however, when curriculum sparks imagination, students can “see more deeply” (Romano, 2013, p. 11) and will entertain possibilities they may have not considered otherwise. Likewise, when I began to imagine what was possible with arts-based curriculum in my Composition courses, I gained a deeper understanding of why I value narrative writing as well as what is possible for narrative assignments if I do not restrict students to alphabetic text.

Crowhurst & Emslie (2012) explain that stories are “complex assemblages of connected, interdependent, and constantly shifting diverse elements (p. 3). Although these elements include plots, characters, and emotions, narrative stories are personal accounts of experiences and students must have the opportunity to tell their stories in the most effective way for expression to occur. Furthermore, stories may “take different trajectories” (Crowhurst & Emslie, 2018, p. 3) such as linear, fragmented, or contradictory, which means students must have the freedom to tell their stories with materials that allow for these. As Dunn (2001) points out, “all writers would benefit from multiple intellectual pathways to generate knowledge, and the world in general would benefit from the intellectual contributions of people traditionally excluded by print-loving pedagogies” (p. 1). Including art-making in writing courses opens up intellectual pathways that are often closed for students when limited to alphabetic text. To open, instead of restrict students, I paired an arts-based assignment with their literacy narrative in order to:

***Include Lived Experiences.*** One problem I noticed in my students’ literacy narratives was that they did not seem to be selecting topics that reflected their lived experiences, instead selecting topics that they did not seem very invested in. My curriculum was not encouraging students to select topics based on their lived experiences because I was asking for them to compose their experiences under one restrictive method of knowing: alphabetic text. hooks (1994) emphasizes the importance of educators valuing everyone’s experiences in their courses, but to do this, curriculum must be inclusive. Curriculum should allow students to speak from their “authority of experience” and “[affirm] the specialness of those ways of knowing rooted in experience” (hooks, 1994, p. 90). Art-making as a multimodal form of composition has the ability to “[reshape] genre boundaries” and “[change] what counts as academic knowledge” by providing opportunities for students to make connections between their personal experiences and learning. Through making or creating imagery, students explore multiple aspects of their identity, revealing that they are “holographic creatures, living multiple stories” (Allen, 1995, p. 10), whereas in standardized writing instruction, students are advised to isolate knowledge and compose it in a linear fashion. Incorporating arts-based activities into

educational settings is a way to, as Allen (1995) explains, break boundaries, loosen ideas, and “[make] way for the new” (p. x), guiding students towards connecting their personal experiences with course content as well as revealing what may be going on in their inner lives. Essentially, arts-based curriculum has the ability to make course content transformative because it educates “the whole person by integrating the inner life and the outer life, by actualizing individual and global awakening, and by participating in compassionate communities” (Palmer, Zajonc, & Scribner, 2010, p. vii).

***Facilitate Learning by Doing.*** I also noticed that my students seemed to be going through the motions of writing their literacy narratives without actively engaging in processes of composition. I believed that my assignment prompt was clear in asking for creative, engaging writing that deviated from standardized essays, but as McNiff (2018) points out, if we advocate for nonlinear ways of knowing, we also must allow for nonlinear methods of inquiry. While many educators teach the way they were taught, higher education is changing to view learning as a way of being in the world rather than passively learning about it (Ross, 2018). The arts facilitate ways of being by requiring students to hold active roles in their learning. Arts-based methods enrich-student understanding of concepts by allowing them to work with raw materials (Greene, 2001). By actively working with these materials, students are not passive in the learning process, instead being involved as active participants who create their own experiences. Dewey (1934; 2005) articulates that for students to “perceive, [they] must *create* [their] own experience” (p. 56). Art-making and writing have several similarities, such as processes of brainstorming, composing, and revising, but my students were unwilling to put effort into their narratives because my assignment did not promote engagement with the necessary steps. Allowing for an artistic component to their narrative, however, can take students out of passive learning routines by requiring them to “assume more responsibility for determining the representational systems that best suit the work they hope to accomplish” (Shipka, 2013, p. 76). Students must make creative choices that only they can explore and determine, rather than attempting to write narratives they think will meet my expectations, but they do not care about.

***Provide Opportunities for Reflection.*** A final issue I noticed with my students' literacy narratives was their unwillingness to engage in reflection of their composition processes, most likely because they were not engaged in their processes to begin with. Reflection is an important stage of any meaningful learning experience. As Palmer et al., (2010) explain, "experience alone opens a door, but intellectual framing and reflection are required if meaning is to be made of the experience" (p. 108). It is not enough to provide students with a writing assignment that asks for personal connection. Instead, educators must provide opportunities for reflection so that students may come to understand the assignment as an experience. If, as Prior (2018) states, educational experiences are about self-actualization, an assignment is not enough to achieve self-actualization; students must continue to reflect afterward to process what they have composed. Like writing assignments, reflective assignments that rely on alphabetic text can restrict students' ways of knowing, while art-making can open students up to nuances, possibilities, and discoveries they may not come to otherwise.

### **Practical Application**

Although revising curriculum can feel overwhelming, it did not take significant time to alter my assignment prompts, as I already had prompts for the literacy narrative and a reflection. In my experiences teaching higher education courses, I found that openness in assignments often creates more diverse student choices, dynamic responses, and productive challenges for students. Table 1 illustrates how I revised my prompts for the literacy narrative.

Original Prompt	Revised Prompt
Write a narrative that tells a story of how you achieved literacy, are working towards literacy, or failed to achieve literacy on a topic of your choice.	Create a hierarchical form that reflects how you achieved literacy, are working towards literacy, or failed to achieve literacy on a topic of your choice and compose a narrative that tells the story that captures the essence of your art.
Write a reflection on how you felt about the process of writing your literacy narrative.	Create art that reflects how you felt about making the first art project/writing. You may choose an overall feeling, or design different parts based on how you felt at different times. Add a brief explanation of what you created.

Table 1. Assignment prompts before and after revising for art-making components

Although I still asked for partially alphabetic responses to both prompts, since I teach writing courses, I hoped that the art-making components would support students' writing processes in all stages, from brainstorming to reflection. Ideally, the arts-based components would result in literacy narratives that reflected lived experiences, active learning, and the thoughtful reflection I hoped for.

### Student Responses

The following narrative analysis of student data was generated from a practitioner action research study (IRB Exempt 19-038) on how art-making influenced students' experiences within my undergraduate Rhetoric & Composition courses. Pseudonyms are used for all participants. Through their individual experiences, I found, as hooks (1994) articulates, that my students did want me to view them "as whole human beings with complex lives and experiences rather than simply seekers after compartmentalized bits of knowledge" (p. 15) when I provided the opportunity for them to showcase their lived experiences in diverse, nonlinear ways. The arts-based aspect of the literacy narrative assignment helped students utilize their own voices that make their work distinctive (Bayles & Orland, 1993) both in their visual art as well as their written narratives. Through students' written reflections on their products and composition processes, I was able to see how

their constructed knowledge moved from symbolic structures in the mind, to meaning-making from experiences, to compositions of knowledge construction (Efland, 2002), which is a significant shift from the constructed knowledge I saw when students were limited to composing their literacy narratives with alphabetic texts.

***“A million ideas popped into my head”***

Amelia stated that “a million ideas popped in [her] head” when she first heard about the assignment. She eventually selected the literacy of understanding her brother’s autism, but felt “terrified” when she thought about the arts-based aspect. Amelia desired to use her knowledge of birds and wildlife to create an extended metaphor for her literacy of autism, but she understood that her art and writing components would need to depict her ideas effectively, calling for a great deal of time and effort. In Figure 1, Amelia painted two different-sized hummingbirds to represent her and her little brother. The flowers represent “new knowledge and understanding of autism” and how “it’s better to adapt than change.” When reflecting on her art, Amelia explained that she loved what she created and how she was able to experiment with watercolor. The process did not go completely smoothly and she painted the images twice so the colors would blend properly, but once she completed the art, Amelia stated that she felt like “a weight [had] lifted off of [her]” because she “got to express [her] inner feelings and it was fun.”

Amelia’s experimentation with new mediums and use of metaphor transferred into her written narrative as



*Figure 1. Amelia’s artistic literacy narrative depiction*

well. She decided to challenge herself to write a poem, a style of writing she was less familiar with, but she selected because she knew it would disrupt her academic writing routines and allow her to express herself in a more authentic way. She stated that she deliberately wrote her poem in a “child-like” voice so readers could understand her perspective of growing up as she achieved her literacy. At the end of the semester, Amelia told me that her literacy narrative poem was her favorite major writing assignment because it reflected so much of herself and allowed her creative ideas to be expressed. She also told me that her group members continued to reference it throughout the semester because they were so affected by it and she even showed it to her family members, who commented on the high skill level. When asked if the art-making contributed to her poem, she explained that she would have not come up with her extended metaphor or attempted such a creative method of poetry to tell her story if she did not have the art to help generate and express her ideas.

In Figure 2. Amelia completed the reflection assignment on her literacy narrative project. She worked with collage and watercolor to express the ideas that floated in her mind. Amelia then used some “old decorative paper” to create a collage that expressed her excitement towards her art and poem. She stated that the Snoopy cartoon accurately illustrated her emotions and excitement and joy that built over the process of creating, and also added heart shape cutouts to emphasize the joy she felt even further. In an interview at the end of the semester, Amelia reiterated how the art-making and creative writing elements of the course allowed her to express herself in a way that was dissimilar to her other course



Figure 2. Amelia's literacy narrative reflection

assignments. The literacy narrative in particular allowed her to illustrate an important personal experience fully and convey her emotions deeply through artistic representation that then transferred into her writing.

***“I tried to think of different things that actually showed growth”***

Blake’s Figure 3 depicts her literacy with scoliosis. When she first heard about the project, she was “intrigued” and decided on her idea for her art before her paper topic. While she knew that she could write about several different literacies, the artistic aspect helped her decide on one that could have different nuances to it. When reflecting on her brainstorming process Blake explained, “I tried to think of different things that actually showed growth or a journey, but could also turn out to be interesting art,” revealing that she spent time considering the assignment beyond meeting my expectations as the instructor. Although



Figure 3. Blake’s artistic literacy narrative depiction

Blake entertained a few ideas, she admitted that her mind kept going back to an image of a spinal curve and how she could artistically depict it. She was excited to depict different textures and layers to represent a curved spine, but the process of creating it was challenging. It took her two canvases to create something she was satisfied with.

Blake described the challenges of her composition process in the following reflection: “I first tried to paint a canvas and then paint my rods, but then it looked bad, so I painted the whole canvas black. I was going to try and salvage what I had, but I deemed it a lost cause and used the other canvas. I started with the rods this time and then embroidered

the curve, which worked a lot better for me.” Through her comments, it is clear that Blake was willing to push herself to create, actively learning instead of passively accepting work that did not meet her expectations. Like Amelia, Blake was also thoughtful of how her visual images could represent aspects of her literacy. The curve in the spine is a physical representation of what her spine looked like, but the curve also reflects the toll scoliosis took on her. Blake explained, “It wasn’t straight and easy; it had a lot of obstacles that would bend me just a little.” The white flower details showcase the way she blossomed from the experience, and she also made signs to show “the major stops in [her] journey.” After she finished the artistic product, Blake was both proud and surprised at how it turned out. She revealed, “I honestly wasn’t sure how it was going to turn out. I had the idea in my head, but I wasn’t sure if I could actually execute it. I don’t think it exactly matches the image I had in my head, but I think I did a pretty dang good job of what I had originally thought of.” Although she saw areas of improvement, Blake engaged in a process of composition that involved significant time in brainstorming, composing, and revising. Additionally, her artistic product has several layers of depth that reflect her external and internal experiences with literacy.

Like Amelia, Blake recognized that the art-making supported her writing process. The layers and aspects within her art created a map of what she felt was important to include in her narrative. Art-making helped Blake see how many years scoliosis impacted her life, causing her to decide to write her literacy narrative in a nontraditional form of journal entries that spanned years of her life. The style of writing Blake selected was challenging in that she had to articulate her literacy through different styles that reflected the age she was when the events occurred. But the writing was also challenging emotionally. Before the project was due, Blake showed me a draft of her writing and began crying. She was worried it did not depict her literacy to the extent she wanted it to. Blake’s go-to writing style was happy and humorous, but her art led her to a place of vulnerability, causing her to reflect on emotions she typically did not include in her writing.

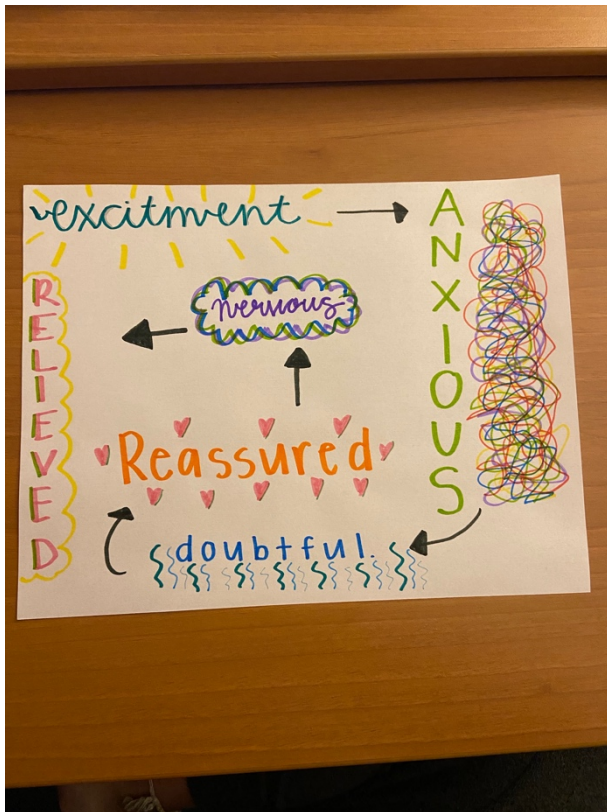


Figure 4. Blake's literacy narrative reflection

Figure 4 is Blake's reflection on the literacy narrative assignment. Unlike Amelia, Blake experienced emotions on a larger spectrum of comfortability and uncomfotability, writing the words "excitement," "anxious," "doubtful," "reassured," "nervous," and "relieved." She chose to visually depict her emotional changes as well with different types of abstract lines and colors. It is important to note that although Blake expressed feeling some emotions that could be perceived as negative, such as anxiety, her reflection also reveals an equal number of emotions that are perceived as positive.

Furthermore, her reflection indicates that she began and ended the assignment with more positive feelings despite her moments of doubt and anxiety. Challenging assignments, especially ones that call for creativity, often generate negative feelings like the ones Blake experienced, but they also show that Blake was actively engaged with her composition process and held high standards for herself. The writing portion of this assignment did not end up being Blake's favorite partially due to the moments of self-doubt she experienced, but the art she made for this project was her favorite. At the end of the semester, Blake told me that she appreciated the opportunity to express parts of her personality that she often does not. Blake has always been comfortable discussing her scoliosis, but the emotions that this assignment brought out in her composition were less comfortable, yet essential to create a narrative that is authentic.

## Conclusion

Before I infused art-making with the literacy narrative assignment, I was ready to give up the assignment altogether because it did not generate the type of writing I sought from students. I was hoping for expressions of emotion, depth of topics, and articulation of lived experiences, but my assignment's restriction to alphabetic text generated mechanical, voiceless, standardized writing. After considering how art-making was a form of composition, I became open to how creating objects is a form of "dynamic language" (Dewey, 1934/2005) that can enhance alphabetic text. It is true that not all students will thrive within assignments that include art-making because it disrupts their writing routines, takes away restrictions they often lean on to dictate their composition choices, and causes assignments to connect to their personal lives more than what they might prefer; however, the teaching of writing, especially in higher education, should feel "dangerous" instead of "safe" (Romano, 2000, p. 3). As educators, we should provide assignments that encourage risk-taking, introspection, and vulnerability so that education can truly be an experience of students constructing their own knowledge. Writing gives students the opportunity to blend the "factual world" with the "imaginative world" (Romano, 2000, p. 4), but only if educators allow for it. Additionally, this type of writing should not be a one-time assignment within a course, but should extend throughout so students have multiple opportunities to take-risks and compose with their lived experiences. After seeing the success with the arts-based literacy narrative, I elected to make my course entirely arts-based, with assignments such as an arts-based rhetorical analysis and arts-based research assignments.

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