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Writing the Lives of Others: The Veterans Project

Sandra Young

Amazon.com lists almost nineteen hundred biographies. Cable television offers A&E's *Biography*, Lifetime's *Intimate Portrait*, Bravo's *Profiles*, and the Biography Channel. We love to watch and read stories about "real" people.

Writing is one of the most powerful tools we have to preserve and understand the past and present. Yet writing biography or conducting oral historiography raises important philosophical and ethical questions. What is the line between truth and fiction? How much do we have the right to know? How much do we need to know? What privacy issues are at stake? What is the role of the imagination in written biographical scholarship? How can literary and dramatic strategies be used in writing about real human experiences?

This essay describes an advanced composition course in which the students studied the ethics, politics, history, and rhetorical strategies involved in writing the lives of others. The heart of the course was a service-learning project that introduced college juniors and seniors to veterans of World War II and the Korean and Vietnam Wars. The students interviewed, wrote brief biographies, and transcribed the wartime stories of a group of veterans from a local American Legion post and its women's auxiliary. The stories were collected in a volume made available to local American Legion posts, veterans hospitals, and libraries in Connecticut.

Rationale for the Course

This advanced composition course is required of English and media studies majors at Sacred Heart University, and it is the last English course that juniors and seniors take before beginning their senior projects. My purpose in designing it was to cultivate in my students, many of whom would be pursuing careers with writing and editing as a focus, a lifelong desire to seek the appropriate language for a given circumstance. I wanted to encourage them to look beyond themselves and their immediate environments to discover how writing both represents and enables an understanding of the lives and experiences of others and how it can produce and provide access to the “real” world.

Oral history assignments are tools frequently used by instructors across the curriculum, especially in history and journalism. Instead of focusing on famous people in history books, for instance, Cynthia Paces’s students at the College of New Jersey interviewed ordinary people who also made history and then placed their stories in a larger historical context (“Syllabus” 2000). Paces wanted her students to realize, by concentrating on the study of history, that “everybody contributes to the past and how we think about the past. You just have to ask.” In a course on war and journalism Gary Rice asked his students at Southwest Texas State University to interview Vietnam veterans and correspondents. Rice (2000: 610) explains that oral histories give students “a vested interest in the material they are learning” and “the chance to experience firsthand the excitement of history.” Paces and Rice provide compelling pedagogical reasons for such projects, and their courses attest to the increasing popularity of life writing. Projects that feature the experiences of our country’s veterans also help students recognize how ordinary people, some of them as young then as my students are now, respond to extraordinary circumstances.

Perhaps Steven Spielberg’s 1998 film *Saving Private Ryan* added fuel to the blaze of wartime remembrances. America’s recognition of the sixty- and fifty-year anniversaries of Pearl Harbor, D-Day, and the start of the Korean War reminded us that the men and women who served their country during those events are growing older and fewer. The dedication of the National World War II Memorial site on 11 November 1995 not only set in motion a long overdue commemoration but affirmed that about a thousand veterans die each day, taking their stories with them. These stories must be told.

And they are being told. Tom Brokaw’s two books *The Greatest Generation* (1998) and *An Album of Memories: Personal Histories from the Greatest Generation* (2001) articulate the sacrifices made by and the recollections of

the World War II veterans. A collaborative venture between the Eisenhower Center for American Studies at the University of New Orleans and the Military.com Living History Project is using the power of the Internet to collect and preserve the stories and histories of millions of servicemen and servicewomen from World War II. Other collections include Arthur L. Kelly's *Battlefire! Combat Stories from World War II* (1997), Lynn S. Kessler and Edmond B. Bart's *Never in Doubt: Remembering Iwo Jima* (1999), Ron Steinman's *The Soldiers' Story: Vietnam in Their Own Words* (1999), and Jennie Ethell Chancey and William R. Forstchen's *Hot Shots: An Oral History of the Air Force Combat Pilots of the Korean War* (2000). Penny Summerfield's *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives: Discourse and Subjectivity in Oral Histories of the Second World War* (1998) explores the effects of the war at home and on women's lives.

Reflecting on the unique, rapidly vanishing learning opportunity that veterans' stories would give students, I became convinced that a writing project that called for them to represent the lives of individual veterans would in fact be mutually illuminating. Moreover, I knew that it could be easily adapted to the existing curricular requirements, as well as to the design of a writing course I had previously taught.

Goals, Texts, and Requirements

"Advanced Composition" (EN 375) "stresses refining style, finding a voice, determining an audience and discovering the rhetorical strategies appropriate for particular genres [of writing]" (*Sacred Heart University Undergraduate Catalog* 2000–2001), and the students work toward producing, as a final project, an accomplished piece of writing that exhibits the crafting of a style and a voice appropriate to the subject. The texts I used included David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky's (1995) *Reading the Lives of Others* and James D. Lester's (1999) *Writing Research Papers*. With my guidance, the students chose a short biography to review as well. They were also required to write ten e-mail journal entries and, in preparation for the final project, four other essays or documents.

In "Essay/Document One: You As Storyteller," each student paired up with a classmate and, after interviews and follow-up questions, wrote an essay that told a brief story about him or her. In this assignment I wanted my students to begin to master the art of asking the right questions and listening carefully to the answers. "Essay/Document Two: You As Autoethnographer in the 'Contact Zone'" began with a close reading of "Arts of the Contact Zone,"

in which Mary Louise Pratt (1995: 182) defines “contact zones” as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other.” Class discussion focused on the variety of zones that the students inhabit and that help define who they are: subcultures that are often mysterious to and misunderstood by outsiders but that serve as common ground to insiders, even if they are strangers. The students identified many contact zones, including gendered organizations like football teams and sororities, trendy pastimes like snowboarding and clubbing, and ethnic celebrations like Kwanza and Italian Christmas Eve feasts. For the written assignment my students had to describe one of their contact zones. They found that they had little trouble explaining their zones and their roles in them to an unfamiliar audience. They realized that we are all comfortable in a variety of zones familiar to us—physical environments, activities, or routines—but may have to struggle to make sense of unknown ones (e.g., the life and experiences of an eighty-four-year-old veteran), which we must then study, Pratt points out, like texts.

“Essay/Document Three: You As an Interpreter of an Autoethnographic Text” required my students to delve more deeply into Pratt’s way of thinking. This time, however, the focus was on the “literate arts of the contact zone” (Pratt 1995: 189), or the use of vernacular expressions, collaboration, and critique, among other things. They read Harriet Jacobs’s “Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,” which Pratt characterizes as “autoethnographic”; that is, Jacobs describes herself in it in “ways that engage with representations others have made of [her]” (183). For example, Jacobs (1995: 64) begins by declaring what others knew her to be: “I was born a slave; but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away. . . . I never dreamed I was a piece of merchandise.” Then, after choosing a review, a critique, or an analysis of another slave narrative, the students synthesized the two texts and illustrated how both employed Pratt’s concept of autoethnography. For instance, Jacobs clearly demonstrates how she was judged an outsider. By examining the second text, the students saw how another writer evaluated a nineteenth-century autoethnographic text through the lens of the twentieth century and observed variations of engagement in a single genre. The emphasis on Pratt’s concept focused my students’ attention on the challenges and potential breakthroughs that are present when different peoples and cultures attempt to understand each other. I wanted my students to realize that, depending on their allegiances and identifications, they were always both insiders and outsiders. This realization, I hoped, would help them interview veterans by enabling them to develop an appreciation for different ways of thinking, of

talking, and of assessing their roles in the world. Ultimately, I wanted my students to be prepared for clashes in the contact zones of student and veteran.

Finally, “Essay/Document Four: You As Critic” asked the students to write reviews of the biographies they had chosen to read earlier in the semester. I provided several reviews as guides. This assignment required somewhat different skills from those used in writing biography, but writing the review showed the students that they could work in two genres and adopt strategic rhetorical tools for each.

The students were now ready to begin their final projects. Writing “Essay/Document Five: You As Biographer” required them to employ all of the skills they had acquired or honed during the semester; it also demanded purpose, creativity, clarity, and the willingness and temperament to interview, reinterview, compose, and revise a document to read before an American Legion post and then publish in a volume.

Sacred Heart’s director of service-learning and volunteer projects and I met with the American Legion post commander and explained the project. A D-Day survivor, the post commander spoke of the importance of teaching young men and women about the past and of how his generation of young men and women had defended our country. Following the meeting, he explained the project to the veterans and asked for volunteers to be interviewed. This post and its women’s auxiliary provide services to more than a hundred veterans; a couple of dozen attend monthly meetings. Yet to convince them to share their stories with strangers proved a formidable task. Some had never told their stories to anyone but family members, close friends, and other veterans. The women declared their stories unimportant. Getting veterans to tell their stories has been difficult for other biographers, too. Don Patton, head of the history roundtable that Margaret Moen (2000: 14) discusses, reports that recruiting veterans “has been the most challenging thing for me,” because he and other veterans “[had gone] off and [done] what our country asked us to do, and it was just what we were supposed to do.” Patton’s sentiment is echoed in the reluctance of many of the American Legion post’s veterans to talk.

So my class and I had to prove ourselves worthy of the trust of these men and women. We were invited to the post, where we watched a meeting, were introduced to the veterans, and began to talk with them in small groups. Eventually, my students’ goodwill prevailed, and twelve veterans—ten men and two women—agreed to be interviewed. Of the ten men, seven had served in World War II, two in Korea, and one in Vietnam. The two women, from the auxiliary, had been stationed in Washington, D.C., during the 1950s.

Meeting the veterans and listening to their stories placed the students squarely in a contact zone like none they had ever experienced. This contact zone required research. Students read selections from the third edition of Richard Marius's *A Short Guide to Writing about History* (1999); the introduction to *Soldiers and Civilians: Americans at War and at Home* (1986), a collection of short stories edited by Tom Jenks; and the introduction to John Limon's *Writing after War: American War Fiction from Realism to Postmodernism* (1994).

I hoped that their previous assignments had prepared my students for their task as biographers. Throughout the semester they and I had discussed and debated one other pedagogical goal: to appreciate that language use constituted an ethically charged act calling for responsible choices and that misusing language had implications and consequences. My students had practiced the art of interviewing, including posing thoughtful open-ended and follow-up questions. Even before the interviews with the veterans had begun, they understood the importance of knowing about the historical events that had been current events to their subjects.

Biographers must navigate the pitfalls of politics and history. They must get the story just right by blending near perfect understanding of the mores and politics at work in the subject's life with the history, culture, and politics of the era in question. What is required, Andra Makler (1999: 46) observes, is a "historical imagination." It is necessary to

create empathy between one's self and the lived experience of those in other times and places. . . . imagining a narrative context to support the events, actions, decisions, and artifacts recorded as part of history is an act of knowing that seeks to understand the experience of others both on their terms and [on] ours. It is a way of acknowledging the common dimensions of shared humanity across the chasm of passed time and the cultural separations of place, language, custom, belief, social class, and gender. (46)

For Makler (1999: 29), the "good story" requires that the biographer comprehend the role that ethics plays in our daily lives and realize that politics is not always about political parties. The biographer also must know that for a piece of history to become more meaningful than reading a book or watching a movie would suggest demands conversation with those who witnessed and participated in the making of history.

In fact, generations of readers have turned for greater understanding of the vagaries of war to the letters, diaries, and journals of the soldiers who served in them and the civilians who supported them. But listening and

recording the stories of veterans forced my students to revise, at least to some extent, many familiar, comfortable representations: the ones in the comics they had read, the movies they had seen, and the backyard war games they had played—the guts-and-glory images they had internalized from popular media. It was necessary for them to realize that history is not just a text but part of life today. It was the veteran sitting next to them, whose war experiences cast him, and combatants in general, in shades of gray rather than in neat black and white. When representations become contested, as they often do in biographical writing, learning is also a process of unlearning, of replacing worn, outgrown, no-longer-useful representations with more authentic, authorial, and unpredictable ones.

Assessment of the Veterans Project and Its Outcomes

My students had five weeks to complete the project. Enough time—or so I thought. But I had misjudged the initial commitment and enthusiasm of some of them as a sign that they would work independently, e-mail me their weekly journal entries, and notify me if problems arose. And problems did arise, from disappearing students to ailing veterans—all indicating that this project would provide lessons for students, veterans, and instructor alike.

Each student negotiated an ethical path through a myriad of situations, and each student's story represented a uniquely political act charged with an understanding of culture, history, economics, social, and religious elements. The students found not only that they could not just record what their veterans said, however elaborate the question-and-answer format, but that the stories they would be retelling required plot, dialogue, and setting. They had to decide which veterans' stories to give voice to, how to work in the historical context, what transitions would make the stories flow, and when to simply listen. Then they had to make decisions about style and language. Many students characterized the words, phrases, and expressions that had been commonplace in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s as an odd mix that could be benignly old-fashioned at one point and racist and insulting at another. Thus, in retelling these stories, they found themselves having to edit for style, content, and audience. This project not only gave them tangible lessons in ethics, politics, language, history, and privacy issues but forced them to consider the likelihood that there were truths to discover in the fictionalized dimensions of their veterans' accounts and the certainty that truth and fiction intermingled in everyone's life story.

Some of the ethical issues of “person-based composition research”

are addressed by Paul V. Anderson. Though Anderson's (1998: 64) concern is the use that composition teachers make of student writing in their research, his point about the "(unintentional) infringement of . . . rights, dignity, and privacy" applies to students interviewing and recording the stories of veterans. In fact, student interviewers may be as vulnerable as their interviewees to this infringement because of their youth, inexperience, and willingness to take their subjects' "embellishments" at face value.

This project, however, had an ethical base. In telling their stories, the veterans trusted my students to treat them with respect and dignity. In fact, selecting stories to commit to paper became the occasion of shared confidences between student and veteran. Discussing this kind of collaboration, Patrick Hagopian (2000: 600) writes that "every oral history interview takes place in a context and against a background of mutual expectations on the part of interviewer and interviewee. In any interview, the oral historian must reflect on how those factors shape the narrative." It is not an easy task, and only a few of my students proved fully capable of it. The work of these few stands out as an example of intelligent blending of student, veteran, and history.

While I had not expected my students to be accomplished enough to debate the fine points of history, politics, and ethics, I had expected them to possess considerable knowledge from their previous courses and to be able to add to it. But I miscalculated their curiosity and know-how at the outset of this course. To explain their dislike of or indifference to history, they acquainted me with the history classes they had taken in high school and assured me that they were notoriously boring—an axiom for many non-history majors. I was also reminded that their information regarding war came chiefly from romanticized Hollywood versions of reality. I hoped that the students would overcome their disdain for history by forging relationships with the veterans.

So I was pleased when many students told me that they had enjoyed spending time with their veterans and learning history from their stories and that they could not, they realized, rely on Hollywood to tell it straight. They had discovered ways to relate to their great-grandparents' or grandparents' generation, and they had had the real satisfaction of knowing that their writing, their words, meant something very important to the veterans. Even the few veterans whose students had been less than diligent during the initial interviewing process spoke highly of them.

For the students, the most difficult aspect of the assignment was the privacy issue. Although these veterans had agreed to be interviewed, many students thought that they had violated their privacy. To write their veterans'

stories “justly, respectfully, and gratefully” (Anderson 1998: 83), the students had become partners with the veterans; they had asked them to read and edit drafts, and some students had submitted a final draft for their veterans’ approval. Still, my students wrestled with the issues of how much they had the right to know and what did and did not need to be told in their accounts. Again, some students managed to strike the appropriate chords in their narratives; some did not.

Throughout the semester my students had told me that they were prepared for whatever they heard from the veterans. After all, they said, they had seen the movies. But I cautioned them that watching a movie is different from listening one-on-one to stories told by ordinary people who had been placed in extraordinary situations. We had also discussed in class how disturbing and difficult some of the stories would be for the veterans. These stories documented conflicting responses, from the boredom of waiting for something to happen to the exhaustion of unrelenting combat. The stories spoke graphically of the brutalities of war: the terror, blood, fear, anger, and revenge; the intense heat in the Philippines; the profound cold during the Battle of the Bulge; the camaraderie; the loneliness. Discovering the wavering line between fact and fiction is central to the retelling of war stories, so each student had to grapple with the difficult task of filtering out the fiction. I reminded them that they needed to check facts—dates, places, events—and ask follow-up questions. Although some students were better at it than others, all of the stories produced during this project gave voice to the veterans’ relief and joy in victory. Some stories, however, remained too painful to tell.

Many students reported that their veterans had been overcome with emotion and had cried when telling of a death. Although we had spent class time discussing what might happen during the interviews, some students were so touched by their veterans’ stories and were so intent on getting them right, on finding the right words for them, that the project overwhelmed them and they temporarily gave up. But in the end they recognized that their veterans were depending on them, and they persevered.

My students became acutely aware that biographers influence the understanding and reception of a story through language, style, and choice of content, and they knew that they should not become “characters” in their veterans’ stories, but some could not resist. Several students thanked the veterans for the sacrifices they had made. Two students began with personal references. One wrote: “It is almost the year 2001 and I sit here in the comfort of my apartment, trying to reflect on what it would have been like to sit here 60 years ago, with the bombing of Pearl Harbor still fresh on everyone’s minds. Having to go to

war to this 21-year-old seems obsolete.” Another began: “Growing up, I always remembered hearing of the Vietnam War. Whether because of my parents, television, or . . . movies, the war was still a controversy well after it was over.” One student editorialized: “History sometimes presents a problem. The problem is that all of the history books and school textbooks really can’t provide people with a real idea of what went on in any era[,] including World War II. The only way that people can really get a grasp for what happened or what it was like back in that time period is by talking to or hearing the stories of people who were there at that time and lived through it.”

Indeed.

My students, who had been spoon-fed Hollywood versions of war and other historical events, recognized the necessity of unearthing the truth of history by listening to those who had made it.

Closing Reflection

The biographies were finished by the end of the semester, but work on the collection of stories continued afterward. Because the students had been invited to read their biographies before the American Legion post and the women’s auxiliary, as well as before an audience of wives, faculty members, other students, and friends, they willingly edited their graded essays further.

The collection was printed for the veterans and others, and the project was deemed a success by the men and women of the post and their families. It had required a lot of work from both the students and the veterans, had tapped a vein of patience that I had not known I had, and caused me to rethink a few of my pedagogical maxims.

The most obvious mistake I had made was to give my students more freedom than they could handle. Because most of them were seniors scheduled to graduate in the spring, and because the veteran interviews had to be conducted outside class, I turned the final project into a kind of mass independent study. I gave each student “comp” time—I did not hold class for five of the last seven class periods (it was a once-a-week class). Instead of coming to class, the students were to contact the veterans, arrange to meet with them, conduct the interviews, begin the drafting process, reinterview the veterans, do research, and write a working draft. They were also to e-mail me a weekly progress report and to call or see me—I was in my office during what would have been class time—if they encountered difficulties. But at first I heard from only five of the twelve students. After numerous e-mails and telephone calls, two others began to correspond with me. Five students seemed simply to disappear.

With two weeks left in the semester, the class reconvened to begin the draft workshop process. Of the five delinquent students, two had done nothing, and three had conducted only one interview with their veterans. Their drafts were a disconcerting mix of poor interviewing; scanty research, which left factual gaps in the veterans' stories; and inadequate composing.

After I had read these students the riot act, giving them an honest assessment of what they needed to do at this point to produce quality work, they rallied and came back the following week with improved drafts. I extended the due date, and every student managed to pass the course. Yet the question remains: why did seven of twelve students go AWOL? Probably because they could. When the class reconvened, however, the delinquent students expressed remorse for having let their veterans down, refused to make excuses, and worked overtime for the rest of the semester to finish. The next time I teach this class, I will not set my students loose but will hold regular class meetings for the entire semester, giving them an hour or so "off" each time as compensation for the interviewing process. I will also set individual deadlines for the interviewing, researching, reinterviewing, drafting, and composing stages of the final essay.

As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "There is properly no history; only biography." When my students met with the veterans, both groups shared biographies and taught history lessons; both groups learned, and both respected the connections that were made. This project demonstrates what is possible when generations meet, talk, and learn from each other.

Notes

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