Writing the Personal-Academic School Gravity Connection

Writer: *noun*. A person. Someone who goes through experiences and feels like people should know about them.

—Patrick's Definition, 11th Grade English

Revision: *noun.* Me growing, as a person and as a writer.

—Maizie's Definition, 11th Grade English

Kylie Kama was a quiet student who was easy to overlook. She had an unassuming presence and was not a discipline problem. She tended to go passively along with others and show little emotion. Her real feelings were difficult to read. She had several friends, but she avoided making herself the center of attention. She rarely spoke in class and had a tendency to absent herself. Her skill at blending into the background, combined with her inconsistent work habits, placed her at risk of falling through the cracks academically if her teachers were not paying attention.

For Kylie, school gravity required a social-emotional element. Academics were a struggle for her, and she was diagnosed with a learning disability, which meant she worked with a resource specialist every day. She did not disbelieve the rhetoric that education was the key to a "successful" life, but she would not engage with assignments that she did not understand—or that she did not find directly relevant—for the sake of a grade. She went through phases where she attempted almost no work and avoided homework completely. As a result, she frequently settled for zeroes or low grades that she either ignored or scrambled to make up at the last minute.

Her life outside of school was erratic, and it was normal for her to move from home to home. Both of her parents struggled with addiction, and neither was in a stable situation. Kylie described contentious relationships with both of them. She was accustomed to sudden ruptures and reconciliations within her family. Based on her descriptions, it seemed that her mother had a pattern of involving herself in abusive relationships, which frequently exposed her children to domestic violence.

Kylie was one of the first students in the class to engage with the narratives and essays presented in this book. She turned in her first narrative on time and finished her second before it was due. This was monumental for her. Her first academic essay was the longest paper she had ever given to me, and it was her first real attempt at academic writing. Over her five pieces of writing, she continually tried to work through a complex problem that emerged from her life story and lent itself directly to academic and literary analysis.

Kylie's personal and academic writing began to inform one another in ways that were representative of many students in the class. In this chapter, I present a range of their responses to the writing tasks, and I show how different students were able to connect to the curriculum on their own terms to arrive at a blend of personal and academic writing that allowed them to grow as learners and people.

In our conversations, Kylie was clear that life lessons were a determining factor in her decision to engage with writing. She explained, "I don't like writing, like if you didn't have the life lessons, I wouldn't see the point of doing your papers, so I wouldn't do them. Because why would I want to worry about something when it's not happening in my life?"

BLENDING GENRES: "A WRITER IS JUST A PERSON"

This chapter elucidates the interrelation between personal narrative and academic writing and the many reasons why it can be advantageous for students like Kylie to explore how personal and academic thinking can work in tandem.

It was obvious to me when I began working with my students that most of them did not intuitively understand the purpose of academic writing. They found it a strange and awkward form of communication with conventions that seemed pointless and somewhat silly. To avoid it, they would sometimes opt out of assignments or give minimum effort. It was clear that they did not perceive academic writing as a potentially helpful forum for working through issues that seemed *real* to them.

At the end of our second year together, I sat down with as many students as I could and asked them to talk to me about their writing. I wanted to know their feelings about it, and if those feelings had changed in terms of how they saw its value. I also asked them their definition of *writer* and whether they considered themselves to be a writer.

Some students described a tangible difference in their approach to writing. Serenity explained, "I used to do assignments *that day*, and I'd always put a date like way before when it's supposed to be due so it looks like I did it before. I was like *oh I'll write about it later, I'll do it later 'cause yeah it's not that important,* like I'll just keep pushing it out of my schedule to like sleep or something." Then she described how her writing had developed substance, saying, "I'm gonna put it in a way . . . I guess my words had no shadows. Now they have shadows, there's something behind them. Before,

they were like freakin' pieces of string with nothing, like thin air, like they weren't even really there. And now they actually mean stuff."

Another student, Abraham, whose work is featured in Chapter 5, presented similar views. His past feelings toward writing were negative, as he explained, "Like before I was like *naw I don't wanna do this*. I wouldn't even like carrying a pencil with me." In describing how his views had changed, he noted, "I love writing now, like I face it. I feel like I can give more details and I feel like writing is a part of life. Without writing it's like I would feel clueless."

Students did not come to these realizations solely through academic writing. It was difficult for them to see the connection between personal and academic thinking until many of them attempted writing in both genres. Depending on their comfort level and inclination, all students had the option of writing only personal narrative or academic prose. Most students attempted both types of assignments, and as they blended genres, the connection between the two became more apparent. Hazel, featured in Chapter 4, was one of the first to understand this. While she was working on one of her *Song of Solomon* essays, she explained to me, "I'm having trouble with this because it's an academic paper. But I'm trying to relate to it, like the reason why I've been pushing myself to do it is because I'm trying to relate it to my personal papers, because it does relate . . . when Milkman goes to Danville, like that's where I'm at right now . . . that's where I think I'm connecting with my academic paper." Through her metaphor, Hazel was trying to develop an angle on academic writing as an opportunity to discover new philosophical ground, just as *Song of Solomon*'s main character does in the second half of the novel that she was writing about.

Theoretical backing for genre blending is abundant. John Dewey argued over a century ago that the use of language in school was "unnatural . . . not growing out of the real desire to communicate vital impressions and convictions. . . . There is all the difference in the world between having something to say and having to say something" (1900, p. 56). Dewey noted that teachers too often devised mechanisms to force artificial language that was divorced from students' realities. My 21st-century students were quick to perceive that without a real stake in a real issue, the work of writing could easily become fake.

Paulo Freire emphasizes this need for *realness* in his idea of the "word-world." He is adamant about the integrity of this approach for connecting with students like mine, insisting that pedagogy should respect and integrate their "actual language . . . anxieties, fears, demands, dreams" (1987, p. 6). The "word-world" is a genre blend of our personal and social worlds and the written words that we encounter. Freirian literacy theory suggests that each informs the other. A student named Patrick echoed this idea when he stated to our class that "you grow academically off your past experiences." His parallel of personal and academic thinking also translated to his definition of a writer. When I asked if he considered himself to be a writer, he explained, "Now I do. Actually, I've always considered myself a writer but I didn't know what

a writer was in school. Now I think a writer is just a person. Someone who goes through experiences and feels like people should know about them."

I wanted my students to define *writer* as someone who has a relationship with writing, because this is a description that many of them fit. I realized that not all in their repertoire of life experience was literature-worthy, and some of their adolescent concerns could seem trivial. There is a difference, though, between self-indulgence and self-awareness. One connotes self-centeredness, and the other points to self-perception. In *The Performance of Self in Student Writing*, Thomas Newkirk (1997) argues that writing can serve a developmental need when young people grapple earnestly with questions integral to their work of self. These questions can become legitimate themes in their work. To develop identities as writers, students need to engage in writing that generates intellectual and emotional intrigue and allows them to voice perspectives at their developmental level even as they are encouraged to deepen their views.

For Kylie and other students, their connection with personal assignments gave them a real purpose and meaning for academic writing. Patrick described personal writing as work that "gives me this whole different definition of what my all of my writing should mean or how I should do it." His brother, Nate, expressed a similar view on what he termed the "personal stuff . . . after you're done most people get like a sense of direction, they feel better with themselves cause they did a paper that's all personal, that's why I like doing it. . . . It makes me want to learn all that academic shit, about the quotes and how to quote things right."

Carol Lee (1995, 2007) argues that culturally relevant instruction should begin with and build on the knowledge and understanding that students bring to school. The goal is to help students perceive how their personal and academic identities can connect. A student-centered approach can bridge curriculum with their experience and value their competencies; it can also allow them to explore the agency reflected in the practice of disciplinarians (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lee, 2007). Opportunities to positively engage with curricula that align with a discipline can support the development of academic identity, because positive engagement ties to our human need to grow and express competence (Marks, 2000; Newmann, 1992). This nexus of competence, confidence, and engagement is fundamental to the pedagogy of writing.

To develop identities as writers, students need at least *some* opportunities to write from experience about what they genuinely understand. If we deny them these opportunities, we may sabotage what Elbow calls "the essential dynamic of writers" (1995, p. 81). Elbow pinpoints the evaluative nature of the classroom as one where students usually find themselves "writing up" to teacher authority, resulting in a common subtext in their papers that asks, "Is this okay?" (p. 81). Writers, in contrast, generally write from a higher place of authority than their readers with a subtext that claims, "Listen to me, I have something to tell you" (p. 81). A writing course should include some assignments that let students write like writers. Hybrid essays that

blend personal experience with analytical framing are increasingly common in first-year composition courses for this reason. Their aim is to help students form critical perspective in a familiar mode before asking them to manipulate theoretical material (Elbow, 1991).

It is important to note that personal and academic writing are hybrids, not opposites. Multiple dimensions of the personal may appear in various permutations in an academic piece of writing. For example, any combination of the topic, the language, the thinking, or the writer's goal may be personal, and within these categories are infinite variations of personal thinking applied to non-personal topics, non-personal thinking applied to personal topics, and so on (Elbow, 1991).

Newkirk (2014) argues that elements of narrative embed in the deep structure of all written genres. He defines narrative as a "causal understanding of the world" that transfers to the causal connections we create in academic arguments (p. 19). He explains, "there is the work of demonstration, claims and evidence and analysis, and [academic] writing can fail when these are done poorly—but these exist in a macrostructure of narrative, a story of inquiry" (p. 118).

As I read my students' narratives, I observed how their causal thinking informed the arguments they embedded in their personal stories. In most cases, they created stories from life experience based on their interpretation of selected evidence, then treated their stories as evidence on which to base life decisions. Their process involved making claims about their experience, backing up these claims with analysis, and drawing conclusions that translated to beliefs they lived by.

By the end of our curriculum, Diego decided that academic writing, despite its conventions, meant more than a sell-out to arbitrary academic authority. He reasoned that academic writing was inevitably an extension of its author. He explained to me, "I wrestle with that because it's hard to write just an academic paper. You know what I mean? Like your voice is always gonna be in the paper even if what you're saying might not always be as valuable to you." Diego's reference to "voice" suggested that personal and social perspectives could translate to academic writing, even when the content did not feel directly relevant.

From a composition standpoint, "voice" embodies the human presence, character, and sensibility in our writing (Newkirk, 2014). It can also emerge in our capacity to speak or write from a conscious theoretical stance (Danielewicz, 2008). bell hooks (1994) identifies "voice" as a process of *coming to voice* through the strategic telling of one's experience, which can facilitate students' ability to speak with authority on other matters. Narrative work pushed some of my students to tell their experience with deeper strategy and sensibility, which helped them grow more conscious of the positions they held that translated to their academic voice.

A SEQUENCE OF LOVE PAPERS

Over the course of the curriculum, students wrote three personal narratives interspersed with two academic essays, as shown in Figure 3.1. Their first task was to define love, and their second task was to attempt to tease out a *narrative template*, or internalized story, that lay underneath their definition.

A narrative template is a schematic structure or "cookie cutter plot" with potential to generate multiple stories in its likeness (Wertsch, 2008). James Wertsch developed the idea from Vygotsky's (1978) notion of *internalization*, or the "mechanisms by which internalized thought operate[s] within the functional system of the self" (Bazerman, 2004, p. 56). This concept underlies the idea of internal narratives that can develop through internalization of experience. They can become templates, or set storylines that we carry in our hearts and minds.

To help my students visualize this idea, I borrowed a collection of Christmas cookie cutters from colleagues. I brought in my rolling pin and flour, some cutting boards, and some rolls of cookie dough from the grocery. I held up different cookie cutters and told students to think of them as "templates," and I asked them to identify patterns before imprinting them on the dough. We worked our way through angels, reindeer, trees, bells, Santas, snowmen, and candy canes, and arrived at the notion that the cookie cutters could represent story patterns we carry within us that can shape the ways we read and alter experience.

Following the second narrative assignment, students attempted their first academic essay, which was an analysis of a character or character relationship that they chose from *Song of Solomon*. I asked them to read the ways their character(s) tried to give or receive love and to identify clues in their stories and story templates as to why they loved in certain ways.

The third narrative assignment—the *Why Me* Revision—was inspired by Hazel, who is featured in the next chapter. The students' task was to try to identify an experience they had written as a *why me* story, and reconceptualize its revision in a template that was broader and more complex. In Chapter 4, my students and I define the *why me* story as one that we tend to fall back on when we do not know another way to make sense of a difficult life experience. *Why me* is sometimes the only story we know how to access.

Figure 3.1. A Sequence of Love Papers

(#1) Personal Narrative	What Is Love?
(#2) Personal Narrative	Draw/Write Love Narrative Template
(#3) Academic Essay	*SOS* Character Analysis
(#4) Personal Narrative	*Why Me* Narrative Revision
(#5) Academic Essay	*SOS* Analysis and Revision

The problem is that it tends to displace more comprehensive understandings. The goal for students was not to delegitimize their *why me* story, but to recognize the limitations it imposed on their personal agency. I did not expect students to magically hit upon a new narrative. Life story revision is messy, long-term work. It is a process, not a task that can be achieved through one paper. I realized that if students were genuinely engaging with their stories, then they were likely to struggle with this assignment. I still wanted them to engage with the process, even if this meant that they pulled away from familiar stories and got stuck because they were not sure where to go or how to develop the revision.

I asked students on their final academic paper to think back to their earlier essay and consider if their *why me* revision led them to read the novel differently. I wanted them to return to the notion of love and to answer the question, how does *Song of Solomon* show love?

ALISHA'S ACADEMIC STORIES

Different students engaged in unique ways with these five papers, and they built school gravity through different aspects of the curriculum. Students varied in their engagement with the literature and its historical context and characters, as well as with the narratives and academic writing, so student choice was an essential component of the curriculum's success. Yazzie-Mintz and McCormick emphasize that "students experience the same processes differently, adults do not mechanically teach and interact with every student in exactly the same way, and engagement is a complex process that does not happen the same way every time and with every person" (2012, p. 758). Some students wrote only the personal narratives, and others wrote only the academic papers. I did not want to demand student compliance in terms of their completing every piece of writing in the "right" format and the "right" order. I did not cultivate an "anything goes" approach but rather let students adjust, self-monitor, and engage with their writing as it fit their thinking in ways that worked for them. Regardless of the writing tasks they chose, many students articulated clear connections between their personal and academic thinking across their bodies of work.

On the first day that students journaled in class to the question *What is love?*, Alisha was one of two students who asked for a moment outside to manage her emotional response to the question. I looked at her paper and it read, "I don't wanna talk about it." When I spoke with her, she said, "Love is just another way to say okay I am ready to get my heart broken." She told me that she was uncomfortable with the narrative assignments, and she asked if she could write fictional stories instead. Given the narrative theme of the curriculum, I thought this was an ideal alternative. I suspected that Alisha's fictional stories would enable her to address her

experiences with love in a substantive but more comfortable way. Memory researchers have built from Tomkins's (1987) script theory to show how scripts, or story schema, that appear in our memories often translate into the fictional stories that we imagine. In one study, Amy Demorest and Irving Alexander (1992) asked people to narrate defining memories and then identified the prominent interpersonal scripts. A month later, they asked the same individuals to write fictional stories, and they found a striking overlap in the scripts embedded in each individual's memories and fictional stories. Alisha described a similar overlap in our conversations about her writing.

When I asked Alisha to describe how she thought of her stories, she explained, "I write them and I base it off the things that happen in my life. Some parts are true and some parts aren't . . . I think I write like this 'cause I don't really like talking about my experience. Just drop hints in bits and pieces." When I asked if there were any themes that recurred in her stories, she replied, "I think the main theme is relationships." I asked her why, and she told me, "I don't know. I guess 'cause my past. 'Cause like I've noticed I meet new people and get hella close to them, then somehow they leave my life."

Alisha wrote all of the academic essays, and all of them centered on the theme of interpersonal relationships. She inquired into the reasons why certain characters were afraid to love, and she explored how their fears affected their family relationships. When I asked her to talk about her academic writing, she said the thinking behind it originated from her personal life. The way she put it, she had trouble writing about herself in the first person, even though her personal story bled into her academic work. She described, "Like if it's academic and I feel like I'm not making it *I* and *me,* then I can do it. The one I'm writing right now, actually I'm enjoying writing it. That's why I told you it's gonna be hard for me to end it."

Like Kylie, Alisha created school gravity through the social-emotional element of the academic curriculum. She chose to engage her personal narrative through academic reading and writing in ways similar to what Toni Morrison describes as the inroads into characters' internal lives that serve as paths into our own: "Like Frederick Douglass talking about his grandfather, or James Baldwin talking about his father . . . these people are my access to me; they are my entrance into my own interior life" (p. 115). Martha Nussbaum (1995) complements Morrison's view that literature can create a safe space for us to think about ourselves in the third person. Literary characters can encourage us to take risks and face stories that we have trouble confronting directly. Nussbaum writes, "Literary works that promote identification and emotional reaction cut through those self-protective stratagems, requiring us to see and to respond to many things that may be difficult to confront" (p. 6).

A sensitive issue Alisha explored through her academic work was her confusion around how family members should appropriately show love.

Her opening lines read:

> In the book *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison, Ruth Foster Dead
> tries to find love in all the wrong ways. She tries to find love with the
> men in her life. But she tries doing it in a way that love shouldn't be
> shown with family. It seems like Ruth has good reasons for what she
> does but they're not good enough. Actually for what she does there are
> no good reasons at all.

As she wrote on, she observed that key family members were missing
from certain characters' lives. Her interpretation echoed "in bits and pieces"
selective parts of her own story.

> Maybe she's like that because her mother might not have been around.
> If she wasn't, then it would have been harder for Ruth to see how
> women should show love to certain people, since it's a possibility that
> she only lived with her dad. Living with a dad can be hard to learn
> how to show love.

Alisha's academic writing probed the notion that people *learn* to show love,
which connected to the theme of her stories and her desire to understand why
she would grow close to certain people and then realize they were gone. Through
her literary analysis, she recognized that people tend to show love according to
how they learned it, even if this means avoiding love out of fear of abandonment.
As she reflected in conversation on her academic paper, she told me:

> Well I finished the part about self-love and Ruth, and I moved on to
> like family love . . . I guess it's 'cause of Macon II, I guess he's like
> scared to form a relationship after, 'cause like his mom died, and then
> he saw his dad get killed, and then he thought his sister betrayed him
> when she and the gold just disappeared out of the cave. And then
> he moved and then he met Ruth and they had two kids, and then he
> stopped sleeping with her, and then he was thinking like *oh, man,
> we're having kids, well if we get closer, if we get too close she's gonna
> hurt me or the kids are gonna leave me,* or yeah. And just the way
> Ruth thinks about how to form a relationship or try to find love in
> ways that, like it's not really there. It's there to her but it's not there to
> the other person. Her dad let her do it and she didn't have nobody else
> to tell her right from wrong.

Despite Alisha's resistance to narrative writing, she used academic writing
to engage in narrative work that she did not voice directly through the "I."
As a result, her academic work evolved some mature insights about love and
relationships as she probed deeply into personal territory.

For Alisha and many others, love became a generative topic that pushed them to surface and build on the knowledge and "actual language . . . anxieties, fears, demands, dreams" that they brought to their work (Freire, 1987, p. 6). It allowed them to self-differentiate. A student named Maizie, whose work is discussed later in this chapter, expressed how it was helpful to have options where "you don't have to write it exactly one way because you can go on and on . . . from one subject you can go all out." Love captured students' attention because it touched their emotions, but it also allowed them a range of choice in deciding how personal to be. As students wrote about the characters, they understood more and more that their ways of being came from somewhere and evolved from a context they wanted to unravel. Love kindled their desire for greater understanding and facilitated their discovery that personal awareness could be enhanced by academic work.

NATE: MAKING A "WHOLE STORY"

Nate resisted the personal narratives for a different reason than Alisha. He initially insisted that he did not buy into the narratives because he had no story to tell. He attempted to write them, but he made it clear that he preferred academic work.

In his first narrative, he wrote, "I'm not like other people, I'm not an emotional person . . . I'm trying to be as open as I can and it's really hard because I don't have any strong personal story that affects me strong enough to have a breakthrough moment."

In his second narrative, he reiterated this sentiment with a little more detail: "We all have a certain type of story that shapes us. For me it's nothing special, it's a boring story . . . nothing interesting I have in my mind to share. I wish I could give you something like a heartfelt story but there's nothing. Yeah my father died but I always kept the same output on life. All that did for me is teach me that life is short and you could die at any moment any time. What you put out in the world is how people are going to remember you."

Nate's first academic essay focused on the fractured relationship between two main characters and former best friends, Milkman Dead and Guitar Bains. Nate located the relationship between Guitar and Milkman in an historical context. He represented them through the metaphor of oil and water, stating in his introductory paragraph that "the two ingredients will mix at first but later after letting it sit the water and oil will start to separate from each other . . . right here were two types of people who will never really become friends, but they did anyway, to become the best of buddies." Nate's metaphor and nuanced understanding of the relationship between Milkman and Guitar was in line with Toni Morrison's description of these characters as "brothers . . . two men who love each other but nevertheless have no area in which they can talk" (Taylor-Guthrie, 1994, p. 111). Nate identified Milkman and Guitar as "different people who have differences to

the story that makes a whole story." This is similar to how Morrison explains it, arguing that her characters embody "certain poles, and certain kinds of thought, and certain kinds of states of being . . . struggling for sovereignty or some sort of primacy. And there are lessons in that sense" (Taylor-Guthrie, 1994, p. 178).

Nate understood more than most other students how the characters' personal stories were grounded in history. Here, he found school gravity. Instead of moving from his personal narrative to the historical, which Diego exemplifies in Chapter 5, Nate started with the historical. Nate's academic writing centered on the premise that history plays out in people's personal lives. Despite his reticence to tell his story, he intuitively understood this idea.

In Nate's second essay, he began to analyze the connections between characters' histories and personal stories that he had dismissed as nonexistent in his life. He focused on the generational succession of the Dead family men, from the original Macon Dead (Jake) to Macon II and his son Milkman (Macon III):

> Milkman's lack of love interest can be traced back to his father Macon. . . . Macon is just a hustler, a plain regular hustler. Macon's father Jake was one of the richest men in his little town in Virginia. Owning the most land for an ex-slave during a time when African-Americans didn't even have a voice is incredibly amazing. But all of that was just taken from him, murdered in front of his two children's eyes.

Nate's analysis of father-son relationships tied to the integration of historical and personal narratives that Morrison describes: "I wanted to translate the historical into the personal. I spent a long time trying to figure out what it was about slavery that made it so repugnant, so personal, so indifferent, so intimate, and yet so public . . . the kind of information you can find between the lines of history. It's right there in the intersection where an institution becomes personal, where the historical becomes people with names" (Denard, 2008, pp. 76–77). Through his academic writing, Nate managed to translate the historical into the personal in a way that emerged in his last personal narrative, which he turned in *after* his final academic essay, in the order that worked for him.

He opened his narrative with a father-son comparison that conveyed the intergenerational theme of his story.

> Me and my father we are pretty much the same. I could already tell that I'm going to be just like him. . . . That's where my meaning of love comes into place. Somebody told me I had the most positive negative attitude in life. . . . That's how I was raised man, cause my father told me *the only thing that matters in life is to make money and support your family*. That's my motto. . . . That's what he did, that's his

grandpa before him and his dad before that, that's where I come from, a family like that.

   I have the thought of *all the men in my family die young,* so I got my uncle right now, and he's so sick, and right now I think he's on an urge to die in the next two or three years . . . and my grandpa, he died young, and my dad, he died at 36. My uncle Jason, he died in San Quentin at the age of 28, murdered. So . . . all this stuff in my family, I have it in my head that I'm gonna die young. It's not the quantity or how long you live, it's the quality that you pull out, so that's what I'm trying to do, so . . . I'm kinda hoping I make it to 40.

   I think of Macon the second. Watching his father die at a young age made him want material things that didn't die, and me, I'm trying to get as much material possessions as I could before I die, I don't care what it takes, I'm gonna make me some money . . . I'm also the third in the family. Milkman you know he's living his life, you know, he doesn't really care about anything. Sometimes, I follow in that path, I just don't really care, you wanna just go through life and pretty much that's it.

I asked Nate if he felt he had grown as a writer from any of the work he had done. He explained, "I can say that this year is the first time of me ever writing anything . . . I've grown to respect my work a little more, cause before I'd just write the shit without even thinking, most of the time copy off other kids, I'd just like turn it in just to make the grade. But now I wanna take more feelings in my work now . . . I like writing essays more now."

When I asked if he had grown as a person, his answer was dicier: "For me, I will always find happiness in a piece of shit. Maybe because I think I might live a short life."

SOFIA AND MAIZIE: "GIVING SOMETHING BACK THAT'S REAL"

Throughout the curriculum, one of my goals was for students' writings on love to merge with the discourse of school to create a type of "third space." Kris Gutiérrez, Betsy Rymes, and Joanne Larson (1995) identify traditional classroom roles and discourses as teacher "scripts" and student "counterscripts." The third space is a "transitional, less rigidly scripted space" where a genuine merging of teacher and student views and voices can occur (p. 452). When the teacher alone defines what counts as legitimate knowledge, then dialogue amounts to students entering the teacher's script on the teacher's terms. In a truer dialogic pedagogy, "students . . . have opportunities to elaborate on and incorporate their own narratives into the larger classroom text" (p. 452).

   Students brought their own definitions of love—they *had* to—to serve as primary texts for the foundation of their work. I could not tell them what

love meant to them. Nor could I qualify how they experienced it. I could not identify specific themes and events in their unwritten stories or dictate how their revisions should take shape. To a large extent, students had to be the experts. This meant deciding what mattered enough to address and using their judgment to determine their process.

Sofia was one student whose selective engagement with the curriculum intrigued me. She did not turn in a single piece of take-home writing during her first 18 months in my class. Contrary to Nate and Alisha, Sofia worked persistently to complete all three personal narratives during her fourth semester. She turned them in on her own time frame when she decided they were "done," including the *why me* revision, which was almost a month late and 15 pages long.

Despite my pleading, she did not engage with the academic writing.

She did read *Song of Solomon* and asked to take the book home and read ahead. This was the first independent reading I had seen her do. She reminded me of this at the end of the year, recalling, "Yeah, remember you would just put books there and before I would be like *naw I don't wanna read this, it's too long*, and when you showed us the *Song of Solomon* one, like when we started going through all the writing of *Song of Solomon* I was like *oh my God I actually want to read this book* and that's why I asked you for the book, I was like *can I take it home* and you were like *yeah sure*. Yeah and I started reading it."

Even though Sofia declined to do the academic writing, she did a lot of academic thinking over the curriculum. She explained to me, "Well before I didn't really see myself doing the academics or the reading because I didn't really think I could do it, and now . . . I feel more free to be able to do something like that." She used characters from the reading to challenge her personal tendencies, as she revealed, "I actually had like a whole fucking week of me fighting myself about Ruth." When I asked her to describe this "fight," she told me, "'Cause you remember I was like *oh my mom my mom my mom*, she reminds me so much about my mom. And it's not just her, it's me too, I was like *see that thing about Ruth*, *or most things about Ruth*, it was me too, like me blaming others about what I have done. Or what I'm doing. And it was like *ugh*, yeah."

Sofia was not comfortable opening up to people who were not in her inner circle. This had played out in a painful way for us the year before. I had asked students to journal on a prompt about a time when they felt invisible. Sofia had written a full page and a half by the time I walked by her desk, and I stopped to read over her shoulder. I whispered that I appreciated her answer and responded to a few lines she had shared. She shut down and stopped speaking to me. We ended up in the dean's office as he tried to mitigate the conflict. She told me that I had not had her permission to say anything about her writing loudly enough for anyone around her to hear. She was right. I apologized, but by the end of year she was barely speaking to me.

Sofia's choice to engage with the narratives indicated a change from her previous discomfort with being vulnerable. She identified this anxiety at the center of her love template.

> I've been so sad for so long . . . I never let myself be loved. I pushed everyone away. And still today I push them away because it's in the back of my head I always have that doubt of if they really love me or if it's just a front. That's why I always act like I don't care. And I know when it's like that I won't talk to that person or hang out with them. I have to really feel like their love is real for me so I can really put myself out there for that person or persons.

Sofia expressed that her wanting to get past her fear of "putting herself out there" was the main reason she wrote the narratives. She relayed to me some of her self-dialogue: "Yeah 'cause I was like *if I don't do this, I'm never gonna feel free to be like, to tell somebody I don't really know or who doesn't really know me something about me.* Yeah 'cause remember before I would be like *nooo, get away.*" Conversations with Sofia sometimes included her closest friend, Maizie, who was one of very few students she trusted. Even so, Sofia disclosed that Maizie had been the first to make the effort. She described, "I didn't want nobody to get too close to me. I only allowed her because she opened up to me and I felt like I needed somebody there. I was new at school and I didn't know nobody there. I was like *I like her.* . . . So I was like, whatever, she's an exception."

Like Sofia, Maizie turned in all of the narratives. She also tried the academic writing even though she did not like it. Similar to Kylie in the beginning of the chapter, Sofia and Maizie emphasized that the personal writing was what drew their interest in school because it pushed them to be honest. Maizie explained, "I didn't really see your essays as homework. I just see it as me being real. And just like letting somebody know what I have to tell. I think you were looking for not lying, like actually giving something back that's real, and that would be our grade, or not a grade but that would be your thank you. You know?" I asked if grades played a role in their decision to do the writing, and they both said no. Honesty proved to be a key factor in creating school gravity for them instead.

At the end of year, Sofia and Maizie conveyed their views on school and writing, and how they had changed over the semester. The change was in their sense of growth as learners and people. Maizie emphasized learning as meaningful when "it shows us something about us and something about school . . . if you're gonna go to college and stuff like that you need to learn about yourself too." Her process of confronting herself made the narratives difficult to write, but it also made her more determined to finish. She explained, "Yes it was hard to write it. I was like, *how should I say it, should I say it like this*, 'cause the last paper, it was freaking hard . . . but I knew what I wanted to say. . . . Do you know how many days I spent at least trying to write a little bit? Since the day you gave it, I was like *maaaannn, how am I gonna write this?*"

Sofia and Maizie felt that they grew as writers in part because they had considerable control over their writing process. Andrea Lunsford (2007) emphasizes that students and teachers alike may struggle to revamp traditional authority structures that are deeply ingrained in our sense of what a classroom is. Yet a classroom can be a hard place for students to negotiate writers' identities if the class structure does not allow them some autonomy. The culture of writing can clash with the culture of schools, but an effective writing classroom must sometimes deviate from a larger educational system that does not address how different students learn or why they engage and instead measures achievement via easily quantifiable outputs. The human factor that distinguishes a classroom from an assembly line caused our class process to evolve into many individualized writing processes and products. In the end, this was a good thing.

Since my students ran with the assignments in quite different ways, it was important that their processes drove their outcomes rather than the other way around. Alisha wrote fictional stories that led to academic essays, while Thomas wrote academic essays that led to narrative perceptions and Sofia wrote narratives that led her to realize why "it's not always bad to open up and just be real." Their difference in process shaped how they approached the actual writing. For example, Maizie felt that foresight mattered in her writing to the point where she explained, "Okay you're gonna think about it and you're gonna be like *I'm gonna do this right*." Meanwhile, Nate insisted that "most of the time when I write a paper, I write with as much of a blank mind as I could, 'cause if I write it with a blank mind, it helps me grow out."

Sofia and Maizie were determined to grow through their work, which meant writing and rewriting as they needed to. In doing so, they took on revision without realizing it. This partly explained their habit of turning in their papers late. If I had returned their papers and told them to rewrite, they would likely have rejected the request, but unprompted and left to their own devices, they were both willing to work through multiple narratives and push their thinking on the same hard issues each time. Maizie described, "Well to me it didn't really feel that I was writing about the same thing. It was me growing, as a person and as a writer. In the last paper I felt like I basically talk about the same thing kind of like in my past paper. . . . I could be *oh well I talked about it before*, but this one was like more, I was trying to make it more like clear. I was trying so hard to be so specific, but I was having trouble with it still a little bit."

Both girls, pictured in Figure 3.2, described a change in their perception of writing and its importance. They defined "good writing" as real language with real associations. Maizie voiced a strong view on this point:

> I think good writing to some people is a lot about trying to use big words or trying to make it sound very professional, very Stanford. But it's just making it real, just being real with yourself. A language where people are like *damn this is real, this is real, this is real*. I think that's

Figure 3.2. Sofia and Maizie on Twin Day

good writing right there, 'cause that's a book I would wanna read, you know, something real. Not something that's all proof with very big words. There's always those papers that have to be very academic, but that's so hard.

I think writing should be connected to life. It should be about life, that's what writing is. If it was gonna help you in life and it's something that you love to do, then why couldn't it be something, at least make it something, I mean, it could be anything but as long as it's real. There's always something that connects to you. If you love writing, somehow some way it connects to you. And that's what makes it good and makes people wanna read it.

While the personal writing felt the most valuable to Maizie, she also acknowledged some academic takeaways and the sense that personal and academic thinking could relate to make education matter. Maizie emphasized that, to her, the personal *was* academic because learning was essentially about developing insight. She explained, "I think when I have homework assignments I'll probably look at them like *you know I don't like academics, but you have to do it*, but what really basically gets us is the personal and just being real. Like what you have and your opinion, I think that's educational. That's you. Even if it's your opinion, you're still learning, you're still opening up, you're

using your head, using your brain, your brain is growing by thinking and just spitting things out. Even if they're not big words."

KYLIE'S NARRATIVE "LIMBO" AND OTHER THEMES

Several students in the class attempted all five pieces of writing in the arrangement laid out earlier in the chapter. A pattern of intertextuality emerged in their set of five papers that was illustrative of Newkirk's point that our argument positions often result from "hard and important narrative work" (2014, p. 116).

Students' love narratives pushed them to articulate positions they held on life issues that extended into their interpretations of academic text. The narrative templates that emerged in their personal writing also influenced how they framed academic arguments. Conversely, some of the moves they made as academic thinkers and writers influenced how they saw themselves as people. Their essays helped many of them pinpoint problem spots or contradictions in their stories that they tried to work out in their *why me* revisions. Revisions in one genre usually led to revisions in the other.

Narrative themes frequently developed from the personal questions that arose in their love narratives and guided their thinking over the next several papers. Examples of these themes are shown in Figure 3.3.

Figure 3.3. Love Narrative Themes

Case Student	Personal Narrative Theme	*Song of Solomon* Essay Focus
Abraham	Dealing with hard truths and self-legitimacy	Truth and self-legitimacy in Guitar's story
Hazel	Shifting from *why me* → *why them* in analysis of her parent–child relationships	Parent–child relationships between Macon II and Ruth Dead and their three children
Kylie	"Victim stories," addiction, and a state of narrative limbo	The perpetuation of unhealthy personal relationships—Milkman and Hagar
Diego	A life theme of struggle—do we shape our stories or do our stories shape us?	The conversion of one's story into positive or negative energy in Guitar and Malcolm X
Nate	Intergenerational story of men in his family who die young	The historical legacy of the Dead family men
Alisha	Love and loss in personal and family relationships	Learning to show love and overcome fear of loss in Dead family relationships

Kylie Kama, whose words open this chapter, combined her personal and academic writing in a way that facilitated her growth in both genres. As she developed a deeper understanding of her personal story, her academic writing developed more depth. Kylie focused her narrative work on the problem of unhealthy personal relationships. When I asked why this issue mattered to her, she offered some background on her family that took me a minute to follow. Her convoluted explanation below was evidence of the emotional confusion that she would use her writing as a tool for sorting through.

> Long story . . . because my sister's dad and my mom are together but her mom . . . okay wait, let me see if I can do this. Okay her uncle married a Samoan lady, which is my auntie by marriage. And then my auntie by marriage has a brother, and he has a Mexican wife. And but they're not together any more. And then my mom got with my sister, well my stepsister's dad. Do you understand that? So like now my sister's mom doesn't like my mom 'cause she got with her husband. So now my mom's having a baby by her husband, she has like three weeks left and I found out on my birthday. I was just like *nooo*.

Kylie's first narrative turned on her belief that love was a fantasy and did not exist. She defined love as a kind of addiction with irreconcilable drama. Her second narrative sketched a pattern in which love inevitably led to pain because it was impossible to create on equal terms. She described relationships as situations where one person took control and the other hoped for mercy or kindness. Kylie's first read of *Song of Solomon* was that this exact situation happened to Hagar. Her first essay analyzed Milkman as a careless, "lost soul" whose actions were reprehensible, and Hagar as a "crazy woman" who could not handle rejection. As Kylie grew to better understand the role that she played in her own story, she began to see both of these characters differently.

Kylie's third personal narrative marked an important shift in the progression of her story. She came to the realization that imbalanced relationships were not inevitable or fated, but were sometimes the result of what she termed a "victim story." She defined this story as one that she developed when she felt victimized by society or someone she loved, yet powerless to change things. This story, she decided, was part of the addiction cycle. It also kept her in what she called a "dark place." She described, "I felt like a powerless person, feeling sorry for myself but not doing anything about it. It's like I was giving up on myself as useless."

Once Kylie identified this template in her personal story as one that underlay her first three pieces of writing, she tried to revise it, but she had trouble finding a storyline to replace it. This put her in an awkward state of mind that she called "limbo." She explained, "I'm really trying to change my 'victim story' into no story. Changing my ways of how I see everything and not sounding like I'm on replay . . . I'm starting to see some things a little

Figure 3.4. (From Left to Right) Victoria, Serenity, Hazel, Kylie, Alisha, Kaliyah, and Dalia on the Roof of Stanford After Sharing Our Work with Credential Candidates

differently, but at some points they come back to a limbo position. I try so hard not to go back." Kylie worked on her *why me* revision until she was literally stuck, and then turned in her paper. She did not resolve the tension in her story, but her ability to locate a problem in how she "wrote" herself helped her reframe her understanding of the relationship between Milkman and Hagar. In her second essay, she argued that Milkman learned to change his victim story by spending time in the limbo that she described. His ability to work his way out of limbo paralleled his learning to understand people instead of judge them. Her analysis of Hagar's breakdown was also different. She argued that Milkman, after much confusion, was able to begin a new story. Hagar was not, and her death showed how internalized victimization could play out in relationships in a particularly injurious way.

When Kylie reflected with me on her writing, she spoke more on her point about learning to understand people instead of judge them. She saw this as a change factor in Milkman's relationships, and she was trying to apply this lesson to herself. She explained, "Right now I'm working on my relationships with people. So I'm trying to see people in a better, like deeper way, instead of just judging them. 'Cause usually I'd just be like *eeew I don't like you*. And I wouldn't talk to you and I'd just mug you. But now after I read the book like I really just wanna know people's background." Another personal takeaway from her academic work was that she began to understand what it meant to work on herself. She explained, "Honestly now I'm starting to not really care about the drama anymore. I'm trying

to like concentrate on me, like it sounds kind of selfish, but I haven't been working on myself before. So now it's coming to a point where I really have to care about me or I'm not gonna become nothing in life."

Over the course of her five papers, Kylie realized that life did not have to be a story of defeat. She wanted to write a new story, but she was not sure what it was.

It was a rhetorical beginning from a student who once stated squarely, "I would never do your papers."