

2.

A RELUCTANT STUDENT TEACHES THE LITERACY NARRATIVE

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13 min read

What You Will Learn in this Chapter

This chapter explores the importance of an expanded view of literacy. It argues that writing about what you love and care about will improve your writing and also deepen your connection to your own expertise. This connection between literacy and expertise likely helps all writers, but it is especially important for writers who may not think of themselves as good writers.

Key Terms

- Literacy
- “Cross Curricular” Literacy
- Writing to Learn

I have been teaching the literacy narrative to students for more than 20 years now. Over time, I have discovered that the best way to get students to think about literacy is to put aside any preconceived notions I have about any topic and simply encourage students to write about and think about what they love. I have always suspected that if you allow students to write about what they care about, their writing will improve. Even more optimistically, I believe that allowing students to write about what they love will improve their lives as well.



When I was growing up, I thought that literacy meant reading books I didn't want to read. For me, high school English classes were a blur of scarlet letters, angry grapes, flies with questionable rulership ethics, and people with names like Hester, Francis, and Doras. I'm positive that it was a flaw in my own thinking, but I never saw school as relevant to anything in my own life, a life that seemed ruled at the time by impossible to navigate social orders of popularity and expertise. A lot of my attitude came from my father. He absolutely hated school and always liked to brag about times that he got things over on teachers. Because I'm a writing teacher now, one story he often tells sticks with me: He wrote the same report six different times about the same book and got six different grades on that same report. When I was younger, I interpreted the story to be an illustration about the arbitrary nature of school and grades, but when I think about that story now I think it means something more than that, something that suggests that no matter what you are planning on majoring in while you are at college, you should get into the business of writing about what you love.

But before I get to that, I would like to tell you a little bit about the relationship my dad had to literacy. As he explains it, all through school whenever he sat down to read he was unable to comprehend what he read. He understood the words, he'd say, but could not comprehend what he was reading. No matter how hard he tried to concentrate, his mind wandered. He'd realize that he'd read an entire page and didn't understand what he read, so he'd go back to the beginning and read again. After reading a second time, though, he'd get just as lost, so he would try again, but that time with the added frustration of having to do it again. "It was hopeless," he said. He understood the words, but each time he read they would lose more meaning. "These days," he would say when telling me the story, "they would have said that I had a learning disability, but back in the 50s all the teachers told me was that I was a dumbass, that I'd never do anything but dig ditches for a living." He would wait for a laugh, which sometimes he would get, and then continue. "So I had this book report hanging over me, and one day I saw this paperback outside of a bookstore in downtown Roanoke. It was called *Street Rod*, and I had been working on a '51 coupe, and so I thought I could at least relate to this and so I worked my way through parts of the book, enough that I could write a report on it."

My father was not alone in connecting to this book. In the US, Henry Gregor Felsen's books were loved (primarily by boys) all through the 50s, 60s, and 70s. Stephen King named Felsen's *Hot Rod* as one of the most influential books of his childhood and it is also reported that Felsen was once given an award from a librarian's association for having written the most stolen library book by any author. Published in 1953, *Street Rod* was the follow up to *Hot Rod* and would have come out about the time my Dad was 12. Two years before that, my father had bought a lawn mower, so that he could make money mowing lawns. As he tells it, he got paid 50 cents a yard. He had borrowed 63 dollars from his dad for the mower and half of that went to paying off the mower and then the other half he saved. In one summer he had paid off the mower so it was all profit after that. By the time he was 14, he had saved enough to buy a car, a '51 Ford for 395 dollars. When I was a kid, I found the story a little suspicious, just a story that was meant to motivate me to work, but simple math does prove that this was possible at the time. Cars were simpler then, and anyone who had a mind for it and the right opportunities could buy a used car and make it happen.

It was only recently that I read *Street Rod*, and what struck me as I was reading it was how much my dad's life intersects with this book. At the start of the novel its protagonist, Ricky Madison, has no identity without a car. Ricky Madison's first decision, the one

that set the plot's motion forward, is to buy the car without his parent's approval. He does, and gets stuck paying \$75 dollars (50 cash, 25 credit) for a car that was likely only worth \$35. A combination of pride and stupidity forces Ricky to keep the deal, but also gives him a plan: to fix up the car and sell it for a profit. This situation creates in him a drive to succeed, one that goes beyond what would have happened had he not been thrown into this crisis: buy a junker, fix it up, and sell it for a profit.

All through his life, my dad did this kind of thing continually. More than once, my mom liked to tell me, she would go to the parking lot of where she worked and find that the car she had driven to work had been sold and there was another in its place. It became a common enough occurrence that she knew to reach on top of the passenger side front tire for the needed key to get home. And I can confirm that at least once a week there was a different car, or different machine, in the driveway that would be his next project. A WW2 Jeep, A B-Model Mack, An 82 Cutlass body with a 69' 455 Olds engine, a 64 Mustang, A three wheel motorcycle, A Harley-Davidson golf cart, A wood paneled station wagon, many different John Deere tractors, various kinds of construction equipment: bobcats, front end loaders, backhoes. It was always a combination of vehicles or equipment my father needed at the time and something that could be sold at a profit. Unlike Ricky Madison, who would die in the novel's didactic close because of having the fatal flaw of recklessness, my father made a living embodying Ricky's plan, eventually going into the auto parts business but always also working these various side hustles, buying and selling machines.

Dad attempted to create this same drive in me, but it didn't take. I remember when I was a teenager, I bought my first Model R John Deere tractor with money I had made working at my father's auto parts store. It came on the back of a tractor trailer, along with three others that my dad had bought from a farm out in Montana. I worked alongside my dad, doing what he did, and taking his advice on it along the way. The tractor needed a new PTO and the rest of the needed work was mostly cosmetic. After putting in 1200 dollars plus another 400 for parts, I sold the tractor for 3,500 to a farmer in the valley. I remember the farmer pulling a wad of one hundred dollar bills from his pocket and counting them out in my father's hand, and then my father handing the money over to me. All the ventures I did with my dad along these lines were successful, but it never felt like success to me. As much of a privilege as it was, it was borrowed. Though it was becoming clear to me that I was developing a love for words at college, I didn't have what my father had when it came to selling.

But as someone who has decided to give his life to helping other people connect to words, I always wonder whether writing that report on Street Rod played some role in making my father successful. Recently, I became interested in the idea, so I asked my father more questions about it. "What do you mean when you say you turned in the same report 6 times?"

"Well, I never exactly read the whole book through, I would just thumb through the book, come to a part that I found interesting, copy that part down on paper so that I would understand it and then connect that to something I was doing. My teacher didn't even know what a street rod was, so I had to explain some things. I remember I got a C on the first report, a B on the second, a D on the third and then Cs on the last three. Different grades each time."

This would have happened in the mid-50s, long before any teacher would have encouraged students to revise their work, but it seems from my perspective that is what this teacher was doing. Having him revisit the same book, the same report each time. "This would have been around the same time," Dad tells me, "that I was able to trade in my 51 Ford for a 50 Ford that had fewer miles, and I put a Crestliner Strip on the 50 Ford, so there was no other 50 Ford in existence that had that Crestliner Strip on it, so years later I got a great price for that Ford too."

In Street Rod, Ricky Madison wanted to make stock cars special in ways that the everyday person would want to buy them. Even though he doesn't remember any of the details of the book now, he remembers that he chose that book because he could relate to it out of his own experience. Beyond that, I haven't wanted to discuss the issue further. Talking with my Dad about his reading has always been a sensitive subject for both of us. But in my own mind I like to think this teacher was letting him turn in the same report over and over again because she wanted him to revisit the topic, to keep refining it, to keep thinking on it, the same way that my best teachers pushed me on topics once I got to college. I like to think she had tapped into something like that. And I like to think that doing so helped clarify directions in his own life.

So part of the point of this, and why I've told you all of this as a way of having you think about the literacy narrative, is there is more than one way to think about literacy. There is the traditional idea of literacy, the ability to read and write words. You put them in a row. You learn to make them clear, interesting, and relatively free of proofreading errors. Most of that gets taught in school. But

there is a deeper kind of literacy, too. The literacy my father had, knowing what to buy and what to do with it when he bought it. Knowing how to go to someone's garage or someone's farm, see a piece of equipment, offer a price and take that piece of equipment home and do something with it that would make someone want to buy it. It is important to write about what you know, though, because doing so allows you to connect to the kinds of literacy you already have and if you write about those, your writing will get better too. On top of that, your thinking about the thing that you love will get deeper, more refined, throughout the process.

The last time that I taught a course on tutoring writing, I was amazed at the number of students who wanted to research and write about students who are neurodivergent, and one of the pieces that really jumped out at me in their research was this:

Neurodivergent students often talk about reading as something terribly difficult, describing times that they read a book but did not understand a word of it, so they would go back and read again and again until the words got in. On the positive side, though, once they understood a book they could speak on it with detail that went beyond what anyone could do.

That was what writing about Street Rod gave my dad, a topic that made him willing to put in the work and it appears to have played some role in the direction of his life as well

That's what I hope you are able to do when you write your literacy narrative, and I hope it imparts agency way beyond the confines of a single class. I have had students write on topics that I've known nothing about. I remember one student back in 2010 who wanted to write about his experience setting up computers to mine bitcoins. After the class was over, he wrote to me to thank me for being a supportive teacher and for helping him clarify this direction. (He changed his major to computer science that semester). He offered to show me how to set up a few extra computers he saw in a corner of my 4th floor Morrill Hall office to perform repetitive actions within World of Warcraft. These actions would prove valuable enough to players that they would exchange them for bitcoin, which was a fairly obscure kind of cryptocurrency he had just learned about. At the time, bitcoins were worth about 25 dollars a piece. I declined his offer, but was happy to have helped him to find his passion. It's possible that writing the literacy narrative may do the same for you.

Discussion Questions

1. If you had to write about only one thing for the rest of your life, what would it be?
2. Putting all economic circumstances aside, if you were free to study anything you want, what would it be?
3. If you had three lives to dedicate to three different careers, what would they be?
4. Think back to different times in your life where you developed an interest in what you describe in questions 1-3. Freewrite on each question for 10 minutes a piece.
5. Out of all of the free writes in #4, which was the most interesting to you? Which did you care about the most?

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