

Getting Personal

I stopped assigning the personal narrative in my developmental writing classes a long time ago. My decision was based on my dread at reading any more essays about sex, drugs, abuse, and abandonment. How could I ask students for more specifics and details or point out their mechanical problems when all they wanted to do was tell their heartbreaking (for them and me) stories. It became overwhelming.

So for years my course has focused on more formal essay writing assignments with little personal experience or observation allowed as support. And this model has worked very well to teach my students how to write college essays, especially about their assigned text, *Into the Wild* by Jon Krakauer. Using topics from this true story of a young man, Chris McCandless, who leaves an affluent life and family behind to test himself in the Alaskan wilderness, my students learn competence in the four criteria necessary to pass their Exit Exam: maintaining focus throughout their essays, development with specific examples and details, organization, and reasonable correctness. They also learn how to choose support from the text, evaluate that support, and integrate it smoothly into their papers.

However, in the last few years, I've felt a growing disconnect between me and my students. I told myself that this was due to the large gap in our ages, but I knew better. In eliminating the personal essay, I had lost the opportunity to "know" my students as individuals with stories of their own. I knew I needed to remedy this, but I wasn't willing to return to those personal essays. Instead, I turned to our text for the answer and developed a series of informal written responses based on prompts from what my students were reading.

Early in the semester, after a discussion of McCandless's steadfast determination to get to Alaska, I asked my students to describe their "Alaska." In the next class those who wanted to, shared what they had written. Some said their Alaska was to finish school and get a good job. Others wanted just to finish the semester successfully because they had failed in the past. For others, their Alaska was to make it through the course. One needed the credits in order to be admitted to the military. There was a young man who wanted to be able to take care of his aging parents; a young mother who bravely tried not to cry as she explained that her Alaska was becoming a good role model for her two-month-old daughter; several non-traditional students who wanted to succeed at this "second chance."

Another assignment was based on a belt Chris McCandless tooled in leather using symbols, drawings, and letters to tell the story of his journey. Here I asked students to describe their journey in the same way and to explain what they had created. This worked very well. In fact, some decided to draw their belts and chose to stand and explain each drawing to the class, using the document camera. One young man who had lost his mother to AIDS expressed that loss by drawing an angel. Another of his drawings explained his presence in Pittsfield. He had depicted the girl who invited him to come to the Berkshires. Finally, he had included the letters BCC to his belt because he believed the school represented his future.

Of course, not all students were comfortable sharing their stories, and I never forced them. But even those students, perhaps because they felt safe in the sharing environment their classmates had created, found a way in their journals or face-to-face to let me know them as individuals. I don't think in the past I've ever come close to learning what I have learned about my students this semester... and without that dreaded personal essay.

Chris Adams