



Promoting At-Promise Student Success

The Power of Autobiographical Reading and Writing Courses

This brief highlights lessons learned from a study of the Autobiographical Reading and Writing (ENGL 1200) course at the University of Nebraska Omaha (UNO). Often referred to as, “Autobio”, the course supports students’ abilities to write effectively by having students narrate their personal experiences and examine a variety of autobiographical writings. Students are exposed to multiple perspectives throughout the course as they engage with course readings and review their peers’ manuscripts. The course has been included in the Thompson Learning Community (TLC) at UNO since 2008 and has positively influenced students’ academic experiences and outcomes. An external evaluation as part of the Promoting At-promise Student Success (PASS) project identified the Autobio course as an effective practice that supports academic and psychosocial outcomes for students from low-income and first-generation college backgrounds. In this brief, we provide an overview of the course, describe how the course positively influences students and faculty, and identify promising practices that can be integrated into the course.

What is Autobiographical Reading and Writing

The autobiographical reading and writing (Autobio) class is currently offered to TLC and Goodrich Scholars through the English department (ENGL 1200). In Autobio, students practice writing while exploring their lived experiences through the lens of creative non-fiction. The course includes examination and analysis of diverse autobiographical stories, often told through essay or memoir, that illustrate the power of documenting and sharing individual experiences and voice. Students develop their own collection of personal essays and share their work with each other in both small peer workshop groups and larger class settings. These processes help students understand their individual and family experiences, gain skills in communicating their perspectives, and learn how storytelling builds empathy, connection, and community. Ultimately, students learn to write effectively and confidently by focusing on craft and mechanics while simultaneously developing and understanding who they are and who they want to be and sharing this understanding with others through their stories.

How Does Autobiographical Reading and Writing Influence Students and Instructors?

UNO serves a large number of low-income and first-generation college students who often face challenges navigating higher education. As one of the few courses required of most students, many first-year composition courses focus on grammar and teaching middle-class academic conventions (Bloom, 1996; Bartholomae, 2005) to support students’ abilities to succeed as college-level writers. However, this approach may unintentionally devalue students’ voices – especially low-income students who may have life experiences and ways of communicating that differ from norms of their new academic context. The Autobio course focuses on writing instruction that affirms students’ lived experiences, builds their confidence, and illustrates how writing is generative as the students construct a manuscript that is meaningful to them. While Autobio likely benefits all students, research confirms that it specifically supports low-income and first-generation students in their transition to college while strengthening their writing skills and building community with peers who can provide support throughout their college experience (Perez et al., 2021).

Positive Impact on Students

- **Increasing Motivation to Write**—Using self-reflection and narrative writing techniques, students explore stories about their lives and begin to process how they have been impacted and influenced by their individual characteristics and backgrounds. Workshopping these manuscripts with their peers and instructors helps them understand the importance of clarity, mechanics, and editing for an audience. This process culminates in the support and celebration of a shared story and helps students gain confidence around writing, which prepares them for success in future coursework. This course is often a favorite of the students, and some even decide to add Creative Non-Fiction or English as a minor by the end of the semester.
- **Developing a Sense of Community and Connection Among Students**—The course structure includes trust-building activities as the students learn how to share their stories. Faculty model vulnerability by sharing their writing as well as how to provide constructive, respectful feedback that strengthens students' writing. Through sharing stories in class, students build a sense of community and connection that often lasts well beyond the end of the course.
- **Affirming Students' Stories and Academic Ability**—The course focuses on validating students' stories and then attends to form and writing mechanics as tools to effectively convey an idea. Students explore the autobiographical writings of published authors, including those who have similar backgrounds, which provides examples as well as affirms their place in higher education. The opportunity for some students to publicly read their story honors their voice and illustrates the value of their work to the larger community.
- **Promoting Reflection and Discovery**—Students learn how writing can be a process of self-discovery as they develop a narrative about their journey to college. They get the opportunity to use writing to re-examine and deepen their understanding of previous experiences. Students also develop empathy and connection as they engage with the autobiographical writing of their peers in the class.
- **Building Relationships with Faculty/Instructors**—Because of the vulnerable nature of this course and the instructor's intentionality in creating and maintaining a safe and compassionate space in which to explore and share stories, students develop a close relationship with each other and with their instructors. It is not uncommon for students to value and maintain these relationships after completing the class – the students become close friends, and the instructor often becomes another touchstone or source of support on campus. Many students seek other classes to take with their Autbio instructor, resulting in many familiar faces in Composition 1 and 2 (ENGL 1150 and 1160). These forged relationships make the transition into Composition less daunting for the students and more enjoyable and engaging for instructors.

Positive Impact on Faculty/Instructors

- Faculty teaching Autbio report feeling validated as student engagement increases, and students report feeling motivated to improve their writing skills.
- In addition to building belonging among students, faculty reported feeling a stronger sense of community and purpose as they engaged with students in developing meaningful manuscripts.
- Faculty often described teaching Autbio as transformative for their teaching practice and pedagogy as they gained a deeper understanding of student motivation, ability, and potential.

Promising Practices for Faculty/Instructors

- Model storytelling and vulnerability by sharing your stories, including drafts that are not polished.
- Identify autobiographical texts that illustrate storytelling and resonate with the students' lived experiences.
- Begin with shorter low-stakes activities that enable students to gain comfort and build confidence before gradually moving toward longer narratives.
- Begin with a focus on meaning and purpose before shifting to writing mechanics as a tool to clarify voice and develop the story.

- Provide supportive feedback that affirms the content of the manuscript along with technical comments related to grammar and structure.
- Explore opportunities for students to share their stories in class or at campus events as a way to illustrate the power and importance of student voice and stories.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Autobiographical writing is more than a composition strategy—it is a pedagogy of validation. By centering students’ lived experiences, instructors can help students transition to college with stronger writing skills, greater confidence, and deeper community ties.

Student Perspectives

“My favorite class I’d have to say is autobio. In high school I didn’t really like reading, but I would do it, and in autobio I enjoy reading about people’s lives, and how they have succeeded in life, and obstacles they have overcome. And also my teacher, she’s great! She has us write journals about our own experiences, and then we write an essay, and it’s not like the typical essays I’m used to writing about history and other things, but this one is about myself, so I can relate to it more, and go into more detail about it. She also has us read to each other and I just like reading about other college students, and what they’re going through, and how it makes you feel like you’re not alone, so that’s my favorite class.”

“I took an autobiographical reading and writing class that is a required class for TLC, and I really loved that class. That class made me realize that the experiences I’ve been through have been worth something, they’ve shaped me into the person that I am today. I realized that there are qualities in me that I probably wouldn’t have had if those situations would have never happened to me.”

Faculty Perspectives

“Autobio is unlike any other writing course I’ve taught. It centers on creative non-fiction (the craft, literary techniques, and honest writing) but it’s really about the power of story, our own and those of our community. At the end of the semester, in my sections, we hold a class reading and it’s a celebration—we clap and cheer for each other, hug and call out compliments—but it’s also emotional. We know what we’ve created together, something special and sacred, and now that it’s over, we are going to miss it. It’s often the first place where my students have told the truth about themselves, where they’ve stood up and spoken these truths to a roomful of people who were strangers 16 weeks ago but now validate and celebrate them. I really can’t think of anything more powerful for someone just stepping onto the edges of adulthood.” (Jen Lambert, Autobio Instructor)

“I love teaching Autobio because it makes writing fun. In their composition courses, students have been constrained from writing how they naturally talk, but in Autobio we encourage each of them to write in their natural, conversational voice. This is like opening up a dam and letting the water flow. We can still help them with grammar after they start writing freely, but that’s much easier than starting with rules and constraints, and then trying to get them to enjoy writing. Our students come from a variety of cultures and ethnicities, so as their reader of their work, I get the joy of experiencing the rich range of voices telling their stories.” (Jerry Cederblom, Faculty Coordinator, Thompson Learning Community)

References

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PASS Project

This brief is based on findings by the research team members of the Promoting At-promise Student Success (PASS) project (pass.pullias.usc.edu). This brief is informed by a longitudinal study conducted in partnership with the Thompson Scholars Learning Communities (TSLC), a set of programs providing at-promise students with a comprehensive array of academic, personal, and social support services. Students participate in two years of structured programming and receive a generous scholarship that covers the cost of tuition and fees in the University of Nebraska system. Our mixed methods study explored whether, how, and why the programs develop key psychosocial outcomes critical for at-promise student success such as sense of belonging and academic self-efficacy.

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