Telling Tales: Personal Narrative Writing as a Retention Strategy

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Abstract

Retention and completion have supplanted enrollment as the focus of community college initiatives. Efforts to address the issue of non-completion often target advising, career planning, and academic underpreparedness. Although these are essential to student success, this paper explores personal narrative writing as another tool that can be utilized to enhance retention. “Telling Tales” has a dual meaning: “telling” as a verb, meaning “communicating to someone,” and “telling” as an adjective, meaning “significant or meaningful.” Community college students have stories to tell. This paper includes three student essays that illustrate a few of the issues that community college students face and that were a catalyst for this paper topic. Unless we as educators know their stories and their significance to their lives, we are underprepared to facilitate their academic experience. Personal narrative can help students develop self-awareness, and identify goals and possible obstacles to them; connect to the instructor and to each other; and gain greater understanding of the world and their place in it. Perhaps most important, writing personal narratives can help individuals recognize themselves as “school relevant” and establish the partnership essential to equitable educational practices and increased retention.

Personal Narrative in the Community College Classroom

Five years ago my cousin was found dead on his bathroom floor. I was thirteen and at that very moment I decided I would never make the same mistakes he did. (Dickerson)

It’s a hard pill to swallow being the niece of a murderer; for you still want to love the person who committed these horrible acts but know that person is no longer there. (Meyers)

I was in shock because my two jobs were closing on the same weekend. I can’t describe that feeling in my whole body. I couldn’t swallow my saliva and my whole body was in shock. (Florian)

When I began teaching developmental English 25 years ago, it was common practice to begin with journaling and personal narrative based on the idea that students could write better about what they know best, themselves. Despite efforts to encourage self-exploration through their writing, however, over the years I have read too many essays about trips to Disney or the prom.

At the other extreme are the essays that seemed to have been written to shock or to garner sympathy. More and more of my colleagues choose to forego assigning personal narrative
writing because they do not want, nor do they feel qualified to, address issues when the writing becomes too confessional in nature. Others use personal writing as a starting point, but quickly progress to more objective, academic writing.

However, to not acknowledge the experiences of our student is to devalue what they bring to the classroom, to devalue them.

What else do many of these students have but their stories?

Paolo Freire (1970) wrote about narration sickness in education, which occurs when no connection is made between course content and students’ experience; instead, students must be actively and critically involved in their learning, exploring connections between issues and problems and among the many facets of their own reality (p. 71). To deny students the opportunity to discover and tell their stories denies the idea of education as a partnership, one in which everyone -- students and instructors alike – learns (Freire, 1970, p. 75).

The demographics of the community college population have evolved in recent years. Primarily due to economic factors, there are more “traditional” students opting to attend community college. However, many of their classmates are likely to be living with the issues, such as poverty, unemployment, racism, crime and punishment, and mental illness, discussed in the classroom. Perhaps because of this diversity in the student population -- the middle-class student sitting beside the disenfranchised, the 18-year-old recent high school graduate next to the 40-year-old returning to school after years in the workforce -- personal narratives are even more relevant in the classroom. Telling their stories provides a means for students to explore their lives and identify the inherent issues that may be impediments to their academic success. It allows a connection to be forged between instructor and student, and among the students for whom the time spent in class is the only time they see each other, unlike those students who attend a
residential institution. Finally, by exploring the factors that have constituted their lives to this point, the personal narrative allows students to discover what they know, making connections to larger issues. The “knowing” and confidence that can ensue are powerful factors in empowering the individual as a student (Chace, 2015). All of these outcomes of personal narrative writing can contribute to student retention.

**Background: Community College Retention**

In recent years there has been a shift in focus at the community college from enrollment to completion. The “two-year” college is anything but that for many students. According to the IPEDS Graduation Rate Survey, at Atlantic Cape Community College, of the cohort of first time/full time students enrolled in fall 2009, only 5% graduated in two years (Atlantic Cape Community College Institutional Profile, 2013).

The factors contributing to that daunting figure are as diverse as the community college population itself. There are those students who enter community college because they are told they have to *do something*. They enroll in classes without a psychological investment or a clear purpose, and so often do not persist, or they take classes that are unnecessary or do not successfully move them towards a defined end, graduation and/or transfer. This is in direct counterpoint to Jenkins and Cho’s (2012) findings that identified entering a program of study early on and having clear guidelines for moving through the sequence with necessary and appropriate supports -- faculty, advising, and student services -- as essential for retaining students and moving them to completion.

Currently at Atlantic Cape, two initiatives have been implemented to facilitate student progress to completion: career planning infused into the curricula, and mandatory advising as prerequisite to registration. The objectives of both career infusion and mandatory advising are
identifying goals early in the students’ academic career; formulating a plan to reach those goals; and connecting students with the faculty and student affairs personnel that support their efforts, fundamental factors underlying student success.

Academic underpreparedness is, of course, another factor impacting student completion. Lacking the requisite academic skills and habits to succeed at college level work, many students nationwide place into the developmental sequence. For example, in fall 2012 at Atlantic Cape, 64.1% of first time/full time students were enrolled in remedial classes, 55.2% in Algebra and 45.1% in English (combined reading/writing) (Atlantic Cape Community College Institutional Profile, 2013). This delay to both their enrollment in college level courses and achievement of their goal of graduation and/or transfer could result in frustration, financial difficulties, and ultimately, dropping out.

At many community colleges nationally, this issue is being ameliorated through accelerated learning initiatives that allow students to minimize or bypass altogether enrollment in developmental classes. For example, at Atlantic Cape, students who place into the upper level of developmental English have the option to enroll in the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP), which comprises College Composition and a co-requisite support class that incorporates academic support, introduction to the college’s support services and personnel, educational planning and advising, as well as more affective issues. One instructor teaches both courses and as a result, instructor and students get to know each other more fully. Community-building was identified as one of the critical features of the success of the ALP at Atlantic Cape (Coleman, 2015, p. 29).

But for many other students not enrolled in the program or otherwise not engaged in the college culture, the factors impeding their progress can go unrecognized and unaddressed.
Whether they test into developmental or college English, they all have history that shapes their attitudes and abilities, and they all bring a diversity of experience to the classroom that impacts their chances for success. Incorporating focused personal narrative writing into the classroom sends the message that those stories are important, that students have something to say, and that we all learn from each other.

This is not to suggest that personal writing should supplant what is traditionally considered academic – third-person, objective – writing. Rather it is another way for students to enter into the academic conversation and to engage with ideas that might at first seem inaccessible to them.

Writing personal narrative provides a means for students to identify experiences and factors that may influence, positively or negatively, their academic progress. At the same time, hearing others’ stories promotes students’ understanding of issues with which they may have no experience, fostering tolerance and empathy, in turn creating the community of learners that can provide a stronger foundation for retention efforts.

**The Storytelling Tradition**

James Phelan (2010) defined narrative as “somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose or purposes that something happened” (p. 219). The idea is as old as humanity itself. Telling stories allows humans to make sense of and connection to the larger world. Although stories may be told for entertainment, they often serve the dual purpose of edification. Humans have always been driven to record their existence, to give it permanence, from prehistoric cave drawings to Sumerian tablets to the written languages developed in the Middle East around 3200 BCE (Baldwin, 2006). Writing of the indigenous peoples of North America, Jennifer Davis (2014) described storytelling as an ancient practice, recognized as a
powerful tool in teaching and learning, one that actively engages both speaker/writer and listener/reader and that is gaining new credence in current pedagogy.

Contemporarily, the value of storytelling has emerged in diverse forms. Consider the success of StoryCorps, founded in 2003 by Dave Isay. The basic premises are that the stories of everyday people “are as interesting and important as the celebrity stories…that we find wisdom, wonder, and poetry in the lives and stories of the people around us. That we all want to know our lives have mattered and we won’t ever be forgotten” (Isay, 2007, p. 1). To date, 100,000 people have chosen to share and record their stories. In 2015, TED recognized the power and importance of storytelling by awarding Isay the TED prize of $1 million to continue and expand his work (StoryCorps.org, 2015).

The idea that everyone’s story matters underlies author Colum McCann’s adaptation of the story-telling tradition to address issues among young people in the project Narrative 4. According to the Narrative4 website, the core methodology is “story exchange, an exercise in which individuals are randomly paired off and each tells a story that in some way defines him or her. Afterwards, each is responsible for telling the other’s story, taking on the persona of his or her partner and telling the story in the first person.” The exercise forces teens to examine their own experiences to determine which story to tell and then to hear their story from another’s perspective, gaining greater self-awareness. For the “retellers,” hearing and telling someone else’s story increases their awareness of others. The goal, as defined by McCann, is “radical empathy” (Lovell, 2013).

The project’s mission statement reads: “Narrative 4 fosters empathy by breaking down barriers and shattering stereotypes through the exchange of stories across the world. Led by globally influential artists, educators, students and community advocates, we are helping to
develop the next generation of empathetic leaders and citizens” (www.narrative4.com). That mission shares much in common with the mission of the community college, specifically the development of an informed citizenship.

On a much more fundamental and universal level, stories play a role in many families’ lives, a point I always make to my students. Although some are certainly meant to entertain, they are often meant to teach, shared to undergird parents’ guidance to their children. How many of us have relatives whose stories were told to us as positive or negative role models? How many of us have told our children our own experiences, with the intention that they can learn from our mistakes rather than making them all again?

Storytelling, an innately human instinct, is a tool that can help us to facilitate our students’ journeys towards their goals and therefore help us in our retention efforts. For narrative to work in a transformative manner in our classrooms requires a variation on what Freire (1970) termed “reflective participation” (p. 65). The story must be more than just the retelling of an event. It should address questions such as, “What does the event mean? What was its impact or importance? What can we learn from it? How does it help us make sense of our world?

**The Role of Personal Narrative in Retention**

**Writing – and Rewriting – One’s Own Story:** Socrates stated that the “unexamined life is not worth living”; however, many community college students, particularly those who are younger, would claim that nothing has happened in their lives, so there is nothing to examine. Unexamined, factors that can either enhance or obstruct students’ success can go unidentified, making it less likely they will be retained. Personal narrative assignments require students to examine their lives and identify a story to tell.
Laurel Richardson (2001) described writing as a “way of nurturing our own individuality and giving us authority over our understanding of our own lives” (p. 35). A similar idea, that the act of writing helps make sense and meaning of experience, was posited by Christina Baldwin (2014).

Writing organizes the mind and the actions that lead from the mind. Over time, the decision and choices we make in the rush of the moment are informed by the self-knowledge our story gives us…in writing we live life twice: once in the experience and again in recording and reflecting upon the experience. (Baldwin, 2014)

Students can first be made aware of the power of personal narrative through assigned readings, which in college texts are often essays telling a story of factors that influenced the author’s identity and experience. Alice Walker in “Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self” described how her life was impacted by physical injury to her eye – loss of sight as well as loss of self-confidence – until she “made peace” with it. Langston Hughes in “Salvation” wrote about how what was supposed to be his initiation into Christianity resulted instead in his loss of faith. These events happened to the author.

Then there are those authors who wrote about making choices that changed, or attempted to change, their life trajectory. Malcolm X, in a section of his autobiography often anthologized as “Prison Studies” or “A Homemade Education,” wrote of the pivotal decision to improve his literacy skills. Though the essay itself does not go beyond his time in prison, one only has to look at his history to realize the impact that made on his life path. Junot Diaz’s story “The Dreamer” tells of his mother’s drastic decision to drink tainted water in an attempt to get the education denied her. Choice and change are universal themes in the assigned readings in the community college classroom.

Reading gives us the opportunity to reflect upon and investigate our lives. In turn, writing is a method of discovery; it helps us uncover or revisit ideas and experiences that were
forgotten or because they were unexamined, their significance was unrealized. Personal narrative writing might address the following questions: What experiences and influences have shaped who we are? What are our values and how did we come to acquire them? From these we might extrapolate: How do these experiences, influences, and values shape who or what we want to be? What brought us to this classroom and what might be impetuses or impediments to success? Self-awareness is fundamental to moving forward to any goal and certainly to student success and retention.

Charles M. Blow, in his 2014 memoir, *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*, included a story of an event when he was six years old that made him realize “we all had the awesome and underutilized power to simply let go of our past and step beyond it” (p. 59). Many students in the community college know inherently that they want different (better) lives than those of their parents or that they themselves have lived to date. However, they may not have anyone to inculcate the idea that change is a possibility and that their story, whether dramatic, tragic, or banal, can be different.

According to Richardson (2001), writing narratives affords individuals the opportunity to write “new plot lines. Because writing-stories lets us discover new things about ourselves and our world, we have the possibility of writing new plots; with new plots come new lives” and “the possibility of rejecting entrenched cultural stories” (p. 37). Deciding in response to a lifetime of anxiety issues to devise an “alternative story for living his life,” Robert Nash (2004) related how rewriting his story enabled him to change into more of the person he wanted to be (p. 34).

Kittredge (1999) asserted that stories are a means of achieving what Aristotle termed “recognition," those moments when we have insight into the world, and further that our stories
“are to help us see, and reinvent ourselves. If we ignore the changing world and stick to the same story too long, we are likely to find ourselves in a wreck” (p. 53).

No one in my class would have guessed the “wreck” that impacted one student’s life. Georgie Dickerson was a conscientious, quiet student in my English class, but not the kind of quiet that indicated deeper issues. Her essay, about her familial connection to a crime that had been covered extensively in South Jersey media years before, illustrates a decision and determination to live a different story. (Story edited for length.)

Five years ago my cousin was found dead on his bathroom floor. I was thirteen and at that very moment I decided I would never make the same mistakes he did. It’s all about whom you hang out with and what those people you call your “friends” are doing. It is true when people say you learn from other people’s mistakes. I learned from watching my cousin battle with his drug addiction.

In high school, my cousin Tim decided to hang with the wrong crowd. He had a girlfriend that no one in my family liked; there was just something mysterious about her. Our family would always tell him to ditch her but he wouldn’t. We finally found out the reason why, she was a druggie and had gotten him hooked.

I came home from school one day to find my family a mess; Tim was in jail. At this time we didn’t know Tim had a drug problem. Tim went out with his girlfriend and two other kids one afternoon. The two kids they were with told his girlfriend to go to this gas station. The two kids ran in the store and then ran out. Turns out they shot and killed the clerk at the gas station. Tim was now in jail and my family bailed him out because he didn’t do anything; he was just in the car. To bail him out of jail we had to put our house up which put us in jeopardy. I lived in fear every day that something was going to happen and I would have been homeless. That caused a big fight with my aunt, my mom, and grandparents. We didn’t talk to my aunt after that.

While Tim was out on bail we learned a little secret about him. My aunt came home from work to find her son “dead” on the bathroom floor. Tim had overdosed on heroin; he was revived. So while we thought he was clean and innocent, he was actually shooting up. After he overdosed his stepfather didn’t want him in the house so they sent him to live at my house with my grandparents. We found needles in his room one day.

Tim was sentenced to 5 years in jail. Jail really changed him for the better. I’m glad he had to sit there because he is a changed man. He is actually coming home December 22 just in time for Christmas. He is now in a halfway house taking classes at a community college in Camden and can come home on the weekends. I’m very nervous for him to come home because we weren’t on good terms when he left.

I’ve made smarter choices in life because of this. It really opens your eyes to what can happen when you make the wrong choices. It made me a better person today. When you see how something like this can tear a family apart I would never want to put my
family through this. I hope Tim stays clean and our family becomes a family again. (Dickerson, 2013)

In writing her story, Georgie critically analyzed the key factors of the experience, including the emotional and financial ramifications of someone else’s actions on others. Though most of us know theoretically the costs of drug use and attendant crime, her story was a grim reminder of the collateral damage such actions engender. No longer was this just a story from *The Press of Atlantic City* archives, but a story of the impact on a young girl and families. The positive impact of the negative experience was Georgie’s own resolution to live a plot line different than that of her cousin’s life. Personal narrative writing can facilitate critical analysis of and reflection on the trajectory of experience; without examining their lives, many students will have little chance of persisting and succeeding in college.

**Fostering connections in the classroom:** Asking students to share their stories acknowledges that each one has a life that has been constructed through a series of experiences that has brought him or her to this present point and that those experiences are valued. That recognition can play an essential role in community college retention efforts.

In a three-year study of 900 students in 13 California community colleges, Booth et al. (2013) determined “feeling nurtured” was second only to personal focus when students were surveyed to factors contributing to their success, and faculty was second only to family as a source of support (p. 20). “Nurturing” was differentiated from “mothering,” with key factors cited being “instructor takes an interest in you and your life” (indicated by 50% of respondents as very important), and “your instructor makes you feel you share something in common” (45% indicated as very important) (Booth et al., 2013, p. 21). Assigning narrative writing is tangible evidence of that interest and provides a foundation for finding commonalities, between student and instructor and among students.

It is in the mutual sharing of our personal stories, particularly in the willingness of professionals to listen to the stories of others that we make the deepest connections with those we are serving. It is in our stories that we…can actually profess what we believe and hear what others profess to believe. Our stories get us closer to knowing who we are and who they are…From both a personal and professional standpoint, I have found that personal narrative writing helps us all to understand our histories, shape our destinies, develop our moral imaginations… (p. 2)

Incorporating personal narrative writing in the classroom fosters learning that is active and critical and creates partnerships in learning. It initiates the dialogue that Freire (1970) termed indispensable to education. Defining the dynamics of classroom interaction, he asserted education must address students’ “preoccupations, doubts, hopes, and fears.”

It is not our role to speak to people about our own view of the world, nor to attempt to impose that view on them, but rather to dialogue with the people about their view and ours. We must realize that their view of the world, manifested variously in their action, reflects their situation in the world. (Freire, 1970, p. 96)

Hearing or reading these stories also provides a foundation for subsequent dialogue between students and faculty. According to Booth et al. (2013), students identified faculty who took an interest in their lives and asked personal questions as both caring and engaging (pp. 21 - 25).

However, before students share their stories, there must be a foundation of trust, and also an understanding by the students that this writing is public communication, not the personal writing of a journal or diary. Nash (2004) shared advice given by a colleague to students doing personal narrative writing.

In my courses, I urge students who write personal narratives, or who share their experiences within a small group, to recognize that they have an ethical and personal responsibility to themselves to pursue or disclose only what they believe they are ready to undertake, and that they consider the privacy and dignity of persons not present whom they include in their narratives. (p. 32)
This responsibility was one considered carefully by Rachel Meyers, whose story follows. While many students in her class were writing the ubiquitous prom or graduation story, Rachel was compelled to relate the story of her uncle’s mental illness and the impact on her life. Before doing so, however, she got permission from her mother to write the story and also asked not to have to share it in peer review. She began her essay “When Nightmares Become Reality,” by providing the background, describing her uncle as a good hard-working person, who was a father figure to her, until he stopped taking his medications. (Story edited for length.)

Many families keep secrets from the kids so they won’t get scared or simply because they won’t understand what is going on. Well my uncle’s secret came out in a big way. It was the end of summer and I was just entering 6th grade and I was visiting with my aunt in Virginia. My uncle was supposed to pick me up because my mother had to go to school. The day came for him to pick me up and he was a no show, which was not like my uncle.

It turned out my uncle had a severe mental breakdown because he had stopped taking his anti-psychotic medication. My uncle had schizophrenia and he was on a downward spiral after his breakdown. He was in and out of mental hospitals and nothing seemed to work for him because every time he would get out he would stop taking his medicine. To him everyone was out to get him even his own family and by this time he was living with my mother and me. This is where I slowly started to fear my uncle and what he was capable of. He never smiled and his eyes were always looked black and bugged out like he was strung out on some powerful drug.

With each day he didn’t take his medicine he became more and more hateful ... he would threaten my mother’s life almost every day. As for me, he barely spoke to me. He would just stare at me with his rage filled eyes muttering under his breath to himself.

After a couple of months of him living with us and his refusal to take his medication, my mother sent him to my aunt’s house. He barely lived there for about a month but he soon left there and we never heard from him again.

(About a year later) we received a phone call from a New Orleans news reporter asking how we felt about my uncle being arrested for murder. My mother instantly thought they had the wrong person and wrong number but it turns out she was wrong. My uncle had killed an innocent woman in cold blood at a bar then left to attempt killing his roommate.

At first my mother wasn’t going to tell me what was going on but she chose to tell me though. When she told me I felt like I was in the middle of an earthquake and the ground beneath me was beginning to separate but I couldn’t move in fear. Instantly I began to cry and I refused to believe her and told her she was lying and that my uncle would not do such a thing. The sad thing though is that even though I didn’t want to
believe my mother a part of me did, for my uncle had become the monster in my nightmares.

That saga didn’t end till my senior year in October. My uncle was found guilty of murder and attempted murder but wasn’t found insane in the eyes of Louisiana. My uncle will be spending the rest of his life in jail.

It has been a year since this chapter of my life has ended and I am still very torn about my uncle. I am happy that the victims’ families have received justice after all these years, but I am also saddened by the fact that I have lost the uncle that I loved so much. It’s a hard pill to swallow being the niece of a murderer, for you still want to love the person who committed these horrible acts but know that person is no longer there.

(Meyers, 2013)

Rachel’s story illustrates first-hand the horrors of mental illness and violence, and the impact on family, issues that can in turn impact student achievement and retention, of which faculty and administrators are often unaware except as statistics. I was honored that Rachel felt “safe” sharing her story and also that she allowed me to share it here; she in turn thanked me for including her story. Rachel has persisted in her education, but many other students may disappear from our classrooms because of stories that go untold.

**Recognizing the Political is Personal and Vice Versa:** Post-structural theory suggests that language is not just a means of recording, but of creating reality (Richardson, 2001).

Language constructs one’s sense of who one is, one’s subjectivity. What something means to individuals is dependent on the discourses available to them. For example, being hit by one’s spouse is differently experienced if it is thought of within the discourse of “normal marriage,” ‘husband’s rights,’ or ‘wife battering.’ (p. 36)

In other words, how people understand an issue is dependent on what they have been exposed to and what they know. As students are exposed to different experiences and viewpoints, their understanding of issues and of the world will deepen and expand. In terms of retention, being aware of the issues and obstacles with which students grapple should enable faculty and administration to be more responsive to student needs to help them persist.

In advocating the use of Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) in the research projects of his students, Nash (2004), making the distinction between those stories that are merely
confessional in nature and those that convey greater meaning, stated that SPN writing is used to explore the subject, not the writer (p. 28). Personal narrative can also be seen as illuminating a subject from the personal perspective. Both viewpoints emphasize the shift in focus from the personal to the universal. The purpose is not only to tell a story but also to make evident the story’s significance not just to the writer, but also to the reader and to society at large. Personal narratives by definition focus on “critical incidents” in an individual’s life; to move them beyond strictly that event, the incident should be organized around ideas and issues “that carry larger, more universalizable meanings for readers” (Nash, 2004, p. 30).

Many of the essays in the community college English textbooks address social issues, such as racism, poverty, and discrimination in the workplace. However, in discussing the readings, students often don’t make the leap from the “academic issues” to how those ideas are manifested in their own realities. For example, in discussing the current economy, they might not perceive themselves as “poor,” even though their parents are living paycheck to paycheck, or they themselves are working minimum wage jobs. Although they would all like more money, they are not homeless or on public assistance. Or they ARE on public assistance and so are able to deny their economic reality. Hearing others’ experiences through personal narrative often brings to light the reality of issues, such as that fine line between living a middle class existence and living on the edge.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, in December 2014, in Atlantic County, the unemployment rate was 11.3%, almost twice the state rate of 6.2%; the unemployment rate in Atlantic City was 17.8%, almost three times the state rate. One edition of The Press of Atlantic City in March 2015 included approximately 20 pages of sheriffs’ sales of homes and businesses.
Labor Day weekend, 2014, South Jersey news was dominated by the closing of Atlantic City casinos. The first day of class that semester, I received an email from a man, Marco Florian, asking for permission to overload into my fully enrolled course as he had just lost his job. In October, he wrote a personal narrative chronicling his experience going from well-employed casino dealer to worried husband and father and now student. (Story edited for length.)

My life is completely different now than about a month ago. Why? Because school was never in my plans and I thought I was set for life but I was wrong and I had never imagined how my life will change.

About two years ago I started a new job as a Table Game Dealer at the newest casino in Atlantic City named Revel.... At the same time I kept my old job at Showboat casino because I had been working there so many years and my boss wanted me to stay as a part time dealer.

June 2014 Caesar Corp announced (plans to) shut down operations of Showboat casino on August 31, 2014. We were very upset that this company was closing a profitable casino just to open another one. They didn’t care about the 2500 employees and their families. I was very disappointed that nobody did anything about it. Government, Mayor, and Unions they couldn’t help us. We were alone on this situation.

About a month later Revel declared bankruptcy for second time and now the only hope was find a buyer; otherwise Revel would shut down in about a month....

August 19 2014 I would never forget that day. Revel announced it would shut down on September 1, 2014 after failing to find a buyer.... I was in shock because my two jobs were closing on the same weekend. I can’t describe that feeling in my whole body. I couldn’t swallow my saliva and my whole body was in shock. I was home with my wife when this happened. She hugged me and then she said, “Everything will be fine, and don’t worry we are together and that is the most important.”

Labor Day weekend I closed Showboat and Revel casinos. That was the worse holiday weekend of my life the weekend when I lost my best jobs of my life. The next day I was depressed, laid in my bed all day, and then my wife came to the room to bring me some food but I wasn’t hungry; then she asked me why didn’t you go back to school? That sounded crazy for me at the beginning because I quit college about 13 years ago and my main concern was to look for a job and I didn’t have time to go to school.

Couple days later I had applied everywhere for a job and nobody called me. I was frustrated; then my wife told me I was not the only one in this situation, looking for a job. Then she said, “You have to be positive. Losing control or being depressed is not going to help at all.” She was right. Later on that day my wife had a job interview.... She got the job. She was very happy and so was I. Next day Resorts casino called me to offer me a dealer part time job. In that moment I realized that my wife told me was right and sometimes-bad situations happen for a reason and we had to be positive and calm down in order to see and think clearly.
Next morning I told my wife that I want to go back to school because I was going to work part time and I would have the time. She was very happy to hear that and we went to the college registrar office. I registered the last day of registration and couple hours before office closed.

It was unbelievable that a week before I was working two jobs and now I was going to school full time and working part time. School is hard especially 13 years later but I’m trying really hard and I like it. I don’t know if I will graduate from college but I certainly know that I will do my best for my family and myself and because I believe that when one door closed many more will open. (Florian, 2014)

Marco’s story, like Georgie’s, is a story of change. Whereas Georgie as a young teenager had an insight that she wanted a different life than that of her cousin, Marco, as a mature man, had change thrust upon him, the result of economic factors beyond his control. His story also illustrates that the support of and sense of responsibility to family can buoy one in stressful times.

However, his story puts a human face on the larger issue, the dismissal of approximately 8,000 people who were victims of the greed and self-interest of the casino industry. Many of Atlantic Cape Community College’s students are employed by the casinos or have one or more parent employed by the casino industry. It is an issue that impacts if not them personally, certainly their community.

Richardson (2001) observed, “A feminist mantra from the 1970s was ‘the personal is the political.’ In the 1990’s, we privileged its inversion, ‘the political is the personal’” (p. 34). Through personal narrative, students may discover how the “political” is “personal” and the connections between what is happening in society or in the world at large and an individual’s own existence. It can help individuals, as Freire said, to “read the world,” to make sense of it and their place in it. Students’ recognition of education as a means of empowering them to take an active and critical role in society may in turn make them more active and critical students, making it more likely they will persist in pursuing their goals and be retained despite obstacles.
**Assuming Ownership of Learning:** For students to be retained and to succeed requires development of what Stephens, Brannon, Markus, and Nelson (2015) termed “school relevant selves – the understanding that getting a college degree is central to ‘who I am,’ ‘who I hope to become,’ and ‘the future I envision for myself’” (p. 3). Many students come to the community college without a history of academic success and without a sense of education as being relevant to their past experience or integral to their lives.

This is particularly true of lower and working class students. Stephens, et. al. examined the relationship between social class and academic achievement, citing the parents’ level of education as fundamental to the disparities that impact student success (p. 4). The parents’ resultant financial status and the inability to help navigate the admissions and enrollment processes are basic factors. But even more basic is that there is often no one who models education as important and integral to day-to-day existence.

For individuals to transform themselves into students – not just people taking classes – entails taking ownership of their goals and of their education. Assignments must connect to the students’ sense of self to cultivate a sense of belonging and to recognize their experiences as valuable to empower them as a part of the academic world.

Personal narrative acknowledges that each student has a life that has been constructed through a series of experiences. In narratives, students explore, and we, in turn, learn about, what is important to them. Assigning narrative indicates that we value their experience; writing their narrative gives them a voice and makes them visible.

Nash (2004) stated that personal narrative writing affords minority students in particular the opportunity to incorporate their personal perspectives into their academic efforts (p.3). The value of their voices, underrepresented in academia, has to be recognized and fostered if the
inequities in higher education opportunities are to be addressed. As Chace (2015) stated, “When we talk about consequential matters, we move toward equality.”

Writing a narrative and exploring the issues that are inherent in the experience can facilitate students’ discovery that they actually have a much richer knowledge base than they have ever realized and that others will learn from them. Freire stated, “Almost never do (people) realize that they, too, ‘know things’ they have learned in their relations with the world and with other men and women” (p. 63). This certainly is true of many community college students, particularly those with little academic success. However, although they may have minimal “formal” knowledge, they have first-hand experience of the world and many of the issues that are addressed in the curriculum. The facilitation of their recognition of how much they know and of the connections between their own experience and the more universal issues, is what Chace (2015) defined as the key role of educators.

A minor miracle can happen in the classroom: the moment when one student, and then perhaps another, much to their surprise…say something they did not know they had the insight to say – or the skill or the courage. It may well be something they could never say to their friends or parents. It may be something unknown even to the student until that moment…. The student…suddenly becomes aware of the potential strength of his or her own mind and thus how capable a human mind is of creating further insights, recognitions, and perceptions. In those moments, a touch of mastery comes to the students. Building on that mastery…can reward the student with the confidence that defines education in a sense that is not simply practical or utilitarian… he or she has gotten to know what ‘knowing’ can be. (Chace, 2015)

Insight, mastery, confidence, and knowing are not “subjects” that can be taught, but are factors that might be fostered through our assignments and our interactions. Facilitating our students’ exploration and subsequent recognition of their own knowledge and abilities through personal narrative will increase the likelihood that they will persist in their efforts and reach their goals of graduation and/or transfer.

**Conclusion**
Again, personal narrative writing is not meant to take the place of formal academic writing. That would be as great a disservice to our students as not including personal writing at all. It is now commonly it is used as a starting point in writing classes, and integrated as part of other assignments; it can help make course work more meaningful.

John McDevitt (2013) addressed the concern that writing personal narrative might bring up emotions and issues for the student that the instructor might have difficulty addressing. However, could the same not be said about any discussions of issues, such as violence, racism, and homelessness, in the classroom? McDevitt offers students the option to write the narrative from a different point of view, allowing some distance from the experience. He added, however, that students who choose to write openly about very personal issues would probably bring them to class in some other way anyway (p. 137).

The key is choice. Although they all have stories to tell, not all students will want to tell them nor should they be required to; rather, we should allow and encourage the inclusion of personal experiences as a way of enriching their academic experience and deepening their learning (Nash, 2004; McDevitt, 2013, p. 137). That, in turn, will enhance our retention efforts.

The conversation about retention often focuses on statistics, but student success is a very human enterprise. Encouraging our students to discover and tell their stories through the form of personal narrative keeps the focus on that fact – that who they are and who they want to be, and helping them become active and engaged citizens of the world and claim their place in it – is central to the mission of the community college. I am grateful to Georgie Dickerson, Marco Florian, and Rachel Meyers for sharing and allowing me to share their stories.

References


