

The Autoethnographic Eye (I): Teaching Literature in College Writing

Ruixue Zhang

Department of Languages and Culture
Beijing Normal University-Hong Kong Baptist University, United International College

Abstract

How can college education, especially language and literature studies, help students better understand themselves and the world they live in? How does a language or literature teacher connect reading and writing activities with the broader society beyond class? This autoethnographic essay reflects upon these two questions through a critical examination of my use of autoethnography in college writing courses. Drawing from communication theories and my own teaching experience, I will demonstrate how teaching autoethnography develops students' critical thinking skills and motivates them to connect their learning with broader social issues. The paper will first share my struggles as a literature scholar and college writing teacher. Then I will discuss how my autoethnography teaching bridges teaching with research and helps students better understand language.

Keywords: autoethnography, college writing, embodied teaching, critical thinking

The Autoethnographic Eye (I): Teaching Literature in College Writing

On August 25, 2021, the very first day of my postdoctoral fellowship at the English Department of Emory University, a pre-business first-year student in my writing class visited me during my office hours. After discussing her first writing assignment, she did not leave immediately but turned to me with curious eyes. “May I ask you a personal question?” She said this in a nervous tone, “Why did you choose to study and teach English?” I was a little surprised though this is not the first time I was asked by people who don’t work in the humanities or who have little understanding of what English literature studies do. “I guess I am good at nothing but reading and writing.” I was joking, “Just kidding. I love reading literature and believe it can help us think of the world more critically.” From her face, I saw how pale my answer was. At that moment, I didn’t quite help her see what literature could do, or rather I myself couldn’t have an insight into the subject I have been studying for a long time. For “outsiders,” literature appears sophisticated and, at the same time, “useless.” As a scholar and teacher of this subject, I share such questions with that student: why does literature matter? What is the use of literature studies? How does

literature help me professionally and more than professionally?

I want to explore these questions through writing an autoethnography of teaching college writing as a literature scholar. The reason I use this genre is primarily because of its transgression of boundaries between personal experience and theoretical analysis. Stacy Holman Jones, Tony Adams, and Carolyn Ellis (2013) argue that autoethnographic texts “typically feel more self and socially conscious than autobiographic works” (p. 23). While “auto” emphasizes an introspective look at one’s own experience, “ethno” points this self-writing towards a larger social or historical context. An autoethnography about teaching English enables me to critically reflect upon the development of my pedagogy and relate it to a general concern about the value of literature in language education. Another reason for choosing this genre is because I use it as the pedagogical framework and major assignment for my college writing courses. Writing in this genre, I can better showcase students’ learning goals and demonstrate the effects of this type of writing on integrating personal experience into public debates on social issues.

In Modern Fiction, Virginia Woolf (1984) warns writers and readers not to “take it for granted that life exists more