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Rendering and the Uses of Personal Experience in Writing

Anne J. Herrington

The impetus and title for this essay come from a research essay written by a former student of mine. Her essay, also titled “Gone Fishin’,” begins as follows:

A popular rap group called Arrested Development once had a song called “Fishin’ for Religion.” I can honestly say I know what they meant. I have been “fishing” for the past two years. Through research and experience I think I’ve finally made a great catch.

In the next paragraph, the author draws on personal experience to describe her disillusionment with Catholicism, concluding “I took the best lessons that I learned there, to care for others and to love wholeheartedly, and went ‘fishing’ for a religion I could trust my soul with.” The essay goes on to focus on how and why her search led her to settle on Native American beliefs in a spirit world. In the essay, she draws on a number of sources, documenting them appropriately, to discuss primary spiritual beliefs shared by many Native American tribes.

I used this essay once in a writing-across-the-curriculum workshop to show how I structured the process of working through a research essay. In doing so, I wasn’t thinking that this opening to her final draft would be controversial. To my surprise, a few faculty objected quite strongly, challenging me as to the purpose of such an assignment: how could I justify having a student include a personal narrative where claims about the Catholic religion were personally, not historically, contextualized. At the time, I responded that my purpose was for students to learn that they could use personal interests as a springboard for research and could use their personal knowledge and experience along with that from other sources in their writing. And I wanted them to realize the importance of situating themselves for readers. A string of defensive responses.

This challenge stayed with me. Even though it was from one person with support from only a few, it touched a chord, really an insecurity and doubt. Maybe I was just perpetuating self-indulgence and uncritical thinking. Similar challenges come from within Composition Studies as well: charges of “sentimental realism” (Bartholomae, “Writing” 67) and cultivating “the sentimental persona of the personal essay” (Mahala and Swilky 373) are ringing in my ear. I
don’t cite these charges to imply an easy distance from them. Indeed, the challenge to this essay genuinely caused me to wonder about my curriculum and approaches in my first-year writing classes. So, I went fishing myself for some answers, not just to the question of the place of personal experience in a college “research” essay, but also to how I ask students to represent their experience in any writing they do.

This essay represents a present attempt to develop part of an answer, a part that relates to an important contribution that Peter Elbow’s work has made to my thinking, particularly with the value he places on writing that “renders” experience. In this essay, I aim to make a case for rendering of experience in academic as well as nonacademic writing by analyzing some of the purposes it serves. Because my primary focus is on my first-year writing course, this essay is only a start toward an answer to questions from faculty in other disciplines. First things first.

Anne the Doubter: Enough of this debate over the personal. You’ve nothing new to add, Anne. Give it up.

Anne the Believer: I’m tempted to. Call Charlie and say I have to withdraw. I’ll just be rehashing tired debates and writing a self-indulgent celebration of “I”-present writing.

Peter: Don’t give up yet. Try writing an instant draft.

Anne the Doubter: Writing under the influence. Am I just being a Peter Elbow groupie?

Peter: (Smiles, his eyes sparkling.)

Anne the Author: They differ frequently. She doesn’t believe any writing is “free.”

Peter: Well, freewriting is both free and nonfree.

Anne the Believer: Always both/and. Yes, but today I want to try to avoid setting up dichotomies, particularly a dichotomy between academy and nonacademic writing.

Peter Elbow: I want to argue for one kind of nonacademic discourse that is particularly important to teach. I mean discourse that renders experience. To render experience is . . . to tell what it’s like to be me or to live my life. I’m particularly concerned that we help students learn to write language that conveys their experience—or indeed, that mirrors back to themselves a sense of their own experience from a little distance, once it’s out there on paper. (“Reflections”136–37)

This claim about the value of writing to render experience is a fundamental belief of Elbow’s about writing, learning, and personal development. What I want to do is make my own case for this kind of writing, exploring some of the multiple functions it can serve for writers and readers. In doing so, I’ll draw on the writing of composition scholars and undergraduates in my writing classes, ones whose writings have influenced my thinking as I’ve been on this fishing
expedition. And, yes, I’ll draw on my own experience. Those composition scholars include Linda Brodkey and Min-Zhan Lu, two whose views differ from Peter Elbow’s in many ways. My intent is not at all to conflate their views or imply some line of influence; rather it is to show how reading across perspectives has broadened my own perspectives, as I hope it will readers’. The writing from the students was done in classes where, following practices first instituted in our Writing Program by Charles Moran, final drafts of their essays were published in class anthologies, these anthologies then becoming the primary texts of the course. I point this out because I believe that having an audience for their writing motivates students and often provides important validation of them as writers and thinkers.

To Peter Elbow’s mind, “discourse that renders is . . . one of the preeminent gifts of human kind” (“Reflections” 137). He identifies it with literary texts, poetry, and autobiography. As he presents it, rendering is distinct from explaining: rendering evokes an experience and the feel of it. Elbow’s conception of rendering seems related to James Britton’s conception of writing in the spectator stance. Britton views this stance as serving a personal, psychological function, conceiving of it as a stance through which we step back from the world—as if a spectator—and remake it, work upon it, and craft our version of it (99–115). Britton’s focus on “making” departs from Elbow’s view of rendering as “mirroring back” and is central to the concept of rendering that I am making a case for. When we write of a past experience, we are shaping it with the mind’s eye of our present self, doing so in a way that feels true to us in the present. While it is a stance Britton associates with imaginative writing, I believe it applies to any writing in which writers take up this stance, certainly autobiographical writing. Britton says of writings in the spectator stance that it “is their function to preserve our view of the world from fragmentation and disharmony, to maintain it as something we can continue to live with as happily as may be” (117). I would add, it can also be their function to preserve ourselves from fragmentation and disharmony.

These purposes for writing personal experience were already in my mind before I began this fishing expedition, but I am now more conscious of trying to heighten students’ awareness that they are indeed shaping experience as they recall and write of it. That shaping may serve for us as writers as a way to transplant ourselves to another time and, by creating and thereby re-experiencing a moment, to ground ourselves, as happens in this passage:

It had never been so white around me; the walls, ceiling, window blinds, flower vases, and closet were all white. As a feeling of being in a holy place swept through me, I gently moved my left hand closer to my thigh and pinched myself. The intense pain I felt assured me that I was awake and not dreaming, alive and not dead. From
every angle, the bright specks of white harassed my drowsy eyes and confused my
tired brain. My room had never been so spotlessly clean; my closet never lacked
clothes peeking out to steal a glance. This was not my room.

In this essay, entitled “White Omako,” Uche I. Nwankpa writes of waking
disoriented, later to find that she is in a hospital, having been taken there while
unconscious and seriously ill. She wrote this essay while struggling through
her first difficult semester as a pre-med major. By invoking a tie to that period
in the hospital, she reinforces her commitment to her goal:

Now that I am a Pre-med student, each time I fill out a form that requires me to
write in my major, each time I am faced with a difficult academic problem, memo-
ries of “Omako” flow back to me. I see myself wearing my imaginary white robe. I
hear Dad’s words: determination, hard work, and time. Then Mum’s sentence
echoes back to me, “She is equal to the task.”

The careful crafting is evident here as Nwankpa renders not only sights and
sounds, but feelings. Her essay was written for an assignment to describe a
place that stands out in memory. The exploratory writing prompts called for
students to write about that place—following excerpts from Sandra Cisneros,
Allan Gurganus, and Judith Ortiz Coffer that included first- and third-person
perspectives. The aim was to heighten students’ awareness that their memory
of that place is constructed and, through the drafting and revising of their own
essays, for them to be conscious of how they were shaping their self presenta-
tion. It was from the Coffer excerpt from “Silent Dancing” that Nwanpka
picked up on the strategy of focusing on color.

Nwankpa’s essay also conveys a feeling of pleasure in the writing of it. As
does the following excerpt written for the same assignment. In it, Andrew
Hobgood writes humorously of huddling with others at a bus stop, waiting for
a bus while a rainstorm whirls around them:

Suddenly a gust of wind came up and blew hard against us. We all leaned into it as if
we could stop it by proving that we were stronger. I looked down once again at my
feet. This time, though, I discovered a leaf that had been blown free from a tree and
stuck to my shoe. I peeled it off and was about to throw it away, when something
occurred to me. I stood very still and got very quiet, so silent that all you could hear
was the rustle of the breeze against my umbrella. I strained to my ear to see if I could
hear the faintest hint of it. Nothing happened though. The Forrest Gump theme just
wasn’t going to start playing. I had hoped that maybe this leaf would be like that
feather in the opening of the movie and some kind of theme would start and I could
break out into this monologue of some sort, but instead nothing happened.

Here, Hobgood seems to take revenge on that rainy day by using it for a
humorous essay. He also plays with “self” for the pleasure of it, calling attention
to his narrative as a construction and himself as depicted at the bus stop that
cold, rainy day, hoping to be transported into another monologue, another role.
An indulgence? Perhaps. But more than that. Using humor and links with
movie scenes, Hobgood is experimenting—playing—throughout this essay
with representing everyday experiences, for himself and for readers. Reflecting
on this essay, Hobgood wrote, “It was just my mind wandering and pondering
on various events. . . . I made the audience look at the bus stop in a completely
different way and I enjoyed doing this.”

As I have implied, certainly by invoking the quote from Britton, writing to
render experience can, and often does, serve personal developmental ends as
well as ends for writing development. It can also serve purposes for learning in
other academic courses. For example, one of the students whom Marcia Curtis
and I write of in Persons in Process told us that the most personally valuable
writing he did while an undergraduate was a spiritual autobiography he wrote
(187–96). It was not for a writing course, but for a course by that name in
Comparative Literature, in which students both read some published spiritual
autobiographies and wrote their own. His autobiography served as a way to
render memories and shape some understanding of his spiritual life and iden-
tity over time. In the Comparative Literature course, this writing was also done
as a way to learn more of the functions and forms of this specialized kind of
autobiography, one that calls for a reflective stance and re-examination of
one’s past from a particular vantage point.

Texts with these attributes—a reflective stance and re-examination from a
particular vantage point—begin to look more like what is accepted by many,
but not all, as “academic writing,” both academic writing to serve aims for
undergraduate learning and academic writing for professional purposes. I’m
thinking here of what Mahala and Swilka term “academic storytelling” and
also of academic writing in our field where personal experience is evoked for
the purpose of making a point about language and literacy as viewed in rela-
tion to class, race, family, and other institutions. Notable examples are Min-
Zhan Lu’s “From Silence to Words: Writing as Struggle,” Linda Brodkey’s
“Writing on the Bias,” Victor Villanueva’s Bootstraps, and Keith Gilyard’s Voices
of the Self. A part of the power of these pieces is in the renderings, the evoca-
tion of childhood experiences as viewed from a later perspective.

To understand how this rendering is used, I looked more closely at Lu’s and
Brodkey’s essays. While both authors stress the public purposes for each essay,
for me as a reader, part of their power comes from the feel that the writing
served a personal purpose as well. In “From Silence to Words,” Lu uses the
recounting of her experiences to urge teachers to recognize that the discourses
of school and home may conflict for some students and, with that recognition,
to adopt a pedagogy conducive to helping students understand and negotiate these possibly conflicting discourses. She makes the point about conflicting discourses through her powerful description of the cultural conflicts she experienced during the Cultural Revolution in China between school Chinese language, infused with the ideology of the Revolution, and her home English language, infused with the ideology of Western literary classics. But in this essay, the renderings of these experiences served a personal purpose as well, as Lu acknowledges. In the opening, which begins with the strikingly rendered line, “My mother withdrew into silence two months before she died,” Lu writes of the power that reflecting on her experiences through words had in helping her create an understanding from her inchoate feelings of confusion and frustration:

My understanding of my education was so dominated by memories of confusion and frustration that I was unable to reflect on what I could have gained from it.

This paper is my attempt to fill up that silence with words, words I didn’t have then, words that I have since come to by reflecting on my earlier experience as a student in China and my recent experience as a composition teacher in the United States. (437)

Note that time and additional experiences also enable her reflection. In other words, by looking back and putting into words from a new perspective, she gave a shape to that experience, made an understanding of her memories, memories that included a mix of images and feelings. She also creates a tie with her past that helps her understand her future. In “Life History among the Elderly: Performance, Visibility, and Re-Membering,” Barbara Myerhoff writes of the purpose such writing and oral telling of past experiences can have for giving shape to one’s life, “a shape that extends back in the past and forward into the future” (111). Myerhoff, a cultural anthropologist, is writing of her study of elderly survivors of the Holocaust. She uses the term “re-membering” to signify this kind of focused rendering that re-animates the past and connects one with a past self and others.

This giving shape by connecting across time is also evident in the following excerpt from Yeon Mi Kwon’s “Between Mountain Ranges.” This essay was written for a research project where students were to inquire into some aspect of their culture or family history by interviewing a family member and doing library research. Kwon, wanting to understand more about her cultural and ethnic identity, focused on the small village where her mother grew up in Korea, studying something of Korean history, folk myths, and everyday life in the village for her grandparents and mother. In the introduction to “Between Mountain Ranges,” Kwon, like Lu, indicates the personal purposes this project also served:
I have found there is a rich culture and history that has gone unacknowledged, yet has been a part of me since my birth. Across vast oceans that separate East from West and across the millennium of time, I have a history, deeply embedded within me. My link is through my mother who traces her life to a small village sheltered by the mountain ranges of Korea. . . . Initially, I was not in search of my identity, but as research progressed and associations were made, it gradually unfolded. It is as if I have tapped a part of my memory I knew not existed.

In this essay, Kwon’s tapping of her memory included rendering some of her own experiences as well as her mother’s and, in so doing, creating a link across oceans and time. The following passage includes some of that rendering:

I visited my mother’s childhood home once, and there is a kind of simplicity there that does not exist anywhere else I have been. I dyed my nails using crushed flower petals, just as my mother had done decades before me. It was only a taste of my mother’s past, yet her ways of Pochun life have sifted its way into the American present. She has a passion for the outdoors and finds joy in working with the soil. If offered help when she toils over weeds, she refuses. She responds that it is her time to remember the past and reflect on the present. Sometimes, I watch her from my bedroom window and I wonder how she works so silently and steadily, what thoughts go through her head?

In rendering these moments, Kwon is creating this tie for herself and shaping an understanding. Here is how Kwon concludes:

My mother and I share a common view of what the mountain’s mysteries are, and a common love of them. We share a link that threads through time and distance, a history that can be identified in generations before us. Somewhere between America and Korea is where I find my identity. But, I don’t think my mother has ever been in this confusion, because she knows where her identity lies. It is somewhere between the misty mountain ranges of Korea, where ghostly laughter of children’s play can be heard and whispering voices recounting ancient folktales spread its truth to the keen listener.

While some might say that Kwon creates an idealized, even sentimentalized, picture, this closing leaves me with the sense that she recognizes that some of “this confusion” to which she refers still remains for her. While her rendering may not evidence the same reflexivity as Lu’s, it still evidences a conscious and thoughtful attempt to compose a coherence for herself, however provisional, and also offer something to readers.

Kwon’s essay was published with three other students’ in a minipublication that they entitled, *Voices of our Past: Unfolding our Cultural History*. The preface they wrote speaks to the purposes they believe these essays serve both for the writers and their readers:
This collection of essays spans great distances between the shores of Puerto Rico and the mountains of Korea, traverses time from the immigration of Italians to America to Hitler’s reign during the Holocaust. Through the voices of our relatives, a cultural history is unfolded to us. These stories and remembrances have more relevance on our present lives than we may assume. It is a key to the understanding of what is past, present, and future. We are all tied to history, the history that lies in books and the oral history passed on by our relatives. Listen carefully to these stories, you may find an answer that you seek.

In this passage, they echo Myerhoff’s point about the function of rendering of past experiences to give shape to one’s life, “a shape that extends back in the past and forward into the future” (111) and of doing so publicly, making oneself visible. And they point to the function and attraction of such writings for readers, offering them a way to pursue such self-searching and shaping for their own lives.

The quality of “re-membering” that Myerhoff writes of is also evident in Linda Brodkey’s essay, “Writing on the Bias,” even though she minimizes a personal function for the essay. Brodkey introduces this essay as an experiment with “autoethnography” (27). As she explains autoethnography, while it resembles personal narrative, it differs “to the extent that personal histories ground cultural analysis and criticism” (xv). What she means by this and how it differs from “rendering” as Elbow presents it is evident in the following excerpts that both render experience and analyze it. In the first, Brodkey tells us of her first trips to the town library, marking her telling as a recollection, not a present experience:

I am sometimes reminded that I nearly became a reader rather than a writer in a vivid memory of myself as a young girl slowly picking her way down the stairs of the Quincy Public Library. I know I am leaving the children’s library and am en route to the rooms reserved below for adults. The scene is lit from above and behind by a window, through which the sun shines down on the child whose first trip to the adult library saddens me. On mornings when I wake with this memory, I am overcome by sorrow even though I know the actual trip to have been a triumph of sorts. (34)

This passage renders for me both the feel of that moment from childhood and the moment of remembering with its sorrow. Brodkey goes on to “read” this moment, that is, to use it as the basis for her cultural analysis of literacy. In doing so, she is also explicitly reminding us in that the memory is a creation of the experience, not a representation of it:

This memory of myself is carefully staged. I can be looking only at the loss of innocence. A young girl. A descent. Away from the light. That I set the scene in a library
suggests a loss specific to literacy. Yet here is a child who read so much that the librarians have declared her an honorary adult. (35)

In this passage, Brodkey can talk of this “young girl,” in the third person, trying to understand her as would an ethnographer. And that is what Brodkey is consciously attempting in this “autoethnography”—to read her own literacy from a social-cultural perspective. I believe that it is through the rendering, an involved perspective, that Brodkey gets back into the memory enough to evoke the feelings—the sorrow felt at a moment of triumph—she needs to understand in relation to literacy. In other words, involvement is necessary to access and recreate the experience that one will attempt to read from a distanced perspective.

There are also sections in Brodkey’s essay where she does not make the move to distance as much from the memory, from the girl of the past. For instance, she does not read her connection to her mother—something fundamental to her way of thinking, that is, seeing on the bias—with the same cultural lens and third person perspective as she does such literacy experiences as going to the library. In a closing section of the essay, Brodkey recalls her mother taking her and her sisters “shopping” for school clothes, except they were shopping just to try on and decide what they’d like, so their mother could then make those clothes for them. Her telling of this memory renders as much the feel of the moment of remembering as the past moment:

Yet even now I can see my mother examining garments, turning them inside and out to scrutinize the mysteries of design, before bustling off to buy fabric. . . .

I lack the skill, the capital, and even the patience to clothe myself with the rigorous attention to detail I learned from my mother. Yet I am never more confident than when I am wearing something I believe she would admire. It is less a particular style of clothing than a certitude that my mother could tell just from the hang of it that I had not forgotten how much depends on the bias. (48)

“Yet I am never more confident than when I am wearing something I believe she would admire.” In these final lines, I feel the emotion of a tie renewed and the implicit statement, “This is what it’s like to be me”—without a move to analyze that self from a cultural perspective. These reflections on her connection to her mother demonstrate how, even in an essay whose primary purpose is cultural analysis, rendering for the purpose of self-affirmation can be present, whether that is the author’s intention or not.

Reading this memory evokes my own memories of similar “shopping trips” with my mother and her then making the skirts, dresses, slacks, suits that I chose. I remember hours standing for fittings in our front room with Mom pinning a hemline, taking a tuck, fussing over the lie of a lapel. I remember other
fitting sessions: Mom fitting sixty plus high school band members for our uniforms each year and fitting wealthy women of town to tailor something or create a dress from a picture they would bring in. I sketch these experiences now with feelings of pride and love, and sadness, sadness at her advanced age with dimmed vision and fingers that no longer work so ably. And I take from this memory a respect for the skills and art of work done by hand, creating a kilt for me, a silk suit for another, a well-fitted slipcover for our living room; an appreciation of the creative intelligence of mind, eyes, and hands. My hands do not create in these ways, but they do feel fabric with the intelligence I learned from my mother and when I walk through stores, feeling fabric to decide whether to look more closely, I renew this tie with my mother, just as I am renewing it now.

In starting to render this memory, I am drawn into feeling those past moments with the emotions of the present. In renewing my connection to my mother and a shared past, I am creating a sense of stability for myself. Yet, this writing also evokes a sense of uncertainty as I wonder about what I truly do bring into the present from my past. In other words, the rendering serves to prompt reflection by being the means of recalling some of that experience. As I reread what I have written, I also see that I am idealizing these moments, representing them selectively as I attempt to create a present “truth” of that past and my mother. This is reflexive writing where I am conscious of creating a meaning, one where my frame of reference is personal relations and where I suspend a cultural frame of analysis.

Still, looking back at what I have written, I also wonder how my mother experienced her work as a seamstress, fitting band uniforms and sewing them late into the evening, fitting dresses for wealthier women. This is a direction my reflection and further shaping of these memories could—but need not—take, viewing my memories with a focus on class and attempting to understand my mother’s as well as my own perspective. Both framings of these memories of the past would be equally valid. Further, I do not believe I would have arrived at either possibility had I represented these memories as only a sketchy example. It is only the close evocation of experience that elicits the feelings as well as details that prompt questioning and further reflection.

Brodkey’s reflection on her tie with her mother is but one part of “Writing on the Bias,” and it is one I am obviously reading as serving a personal purpose—whether intentional or not—for Linda Brodkey, as does the writing I began for me. But that is not Brodkey’s primary purpose and elsewhere she writes that for her the value of autoethnographies is “the potential for social change rather than any psychological benefits that may accrue” (28). By focusing on personal purposes, I do not mean to minimize the social purposes served by Brodkey’s critique of the literacy values she encountered in school—
just to stress that it is equally important that the personal purposes that may enter in, whether intentionally or no, not be dismissed. And, more generally, that the presence and function of rendering in these academic essays of cultural analysis not be eclipsed. Failing to recognize the presence of rendering in some academic writing—including writing within Composition Studies—contributes to dismissing its value in undergraduate writing.

When we render experiences—even for ends of cultural analysis—we tap into emotions that we may be unable or unwilling to analyze objectively. That does not lessen the value of the cultural analysis, but it should serve to remind us of the limits of our own analytic control and the powerful pull to create our own “reality,” provisional as it may be and sentimental as it may sometimes seem to others. Paradoxically, though, as I have tried to illustrate, rendering of experience, while it can sometimes sidestep analysis, can also be the opening for analysis and interpretation. For Brodkey, the sorrow that she feels recalling her childhood visits to the library prompt her reflections on the relations between class, schooling, and literacy.

Lu’s and Brodkey's essays underscore that our renderings themselves are creations. As Lu argues in much of her work, experience is created in the telling, by the words we use. In “Redefining the Literate Self: The Politics of Critical Affirmation,” Lu is critical of approaches that treat “personal experience” as a self-evident thing existing prior to and outside of discursive practices (174). Instead, discursive practices shape how we know experience. While I am reluctant to grant that all knowing is discursive or that all knowing is shaped predominantly by discursive practices, I do accept that to access experience is to create it. On this ground alone, Lu’s argument is persuasive: we should stress “revision” instead of “recitation and revelation of the personal” (174). In this essay, Lu’s argument is couched in terms of a sociocultural approach to reading “the formation of one’s self and the material conditions of one’s life” (174). Drawing on Cornel West’s ethic of “critical affirmation,” she poses a kind of self-examination of our literacy practices as scholars that asks us to “grapple with our own privileges as well as experiences of exclusion” and “to approach more respectfully and responsibly those histories and experiences which appear different from what one calls one’s own” (173). In the essay, she models this dual act of reading one’s self and reading others for the aim of understanding and joining cause across differences to realize the ultimate goal of social justice, of “hanging together as we work to end oppression in the twenty-first century” (193).

In “After Words: A Choice of Words Remains,” Lynn Worsham demonstrates the power of such revising, or rewording, of renderings of past experiences. In the essay, she revisits a story she had heard many times from her mother. The
core of the story is that when the two- or three-year-old Worsham was told by her mother that a “colored” woman named Betty was going to come to care for her, Worsham referred to her as “Blue Betty,” reflecting her childhood understanding of what “colored” must mean. Worsham works through the story as her mother told it successive times and then attempts to reword it from the perspective of race and gender, moving, as she writes, from “seeing blue to seeing red” (340). Worsham writes that her aim is to “educate myself first by working theory close to the bone” (335). To work close to the bone requires the kind of rendering that touches emotions as well. Like Lu, Worsham believes such an approach—an open-minded and reflexive reviewing of stories we tell about who we are, coupled with open-minded listening—offers a way to work across lines that divide people, such as lines of race, class, gender, culture.

Autobiographical rendering that prompts revision, not solely recitation and revelation, is valuable in its own right for writers, but also for readers. Commenting retrospectively on two autobiographical essays written during a first-year writing course, Abigail Ferrer wrote, “As a writer, I’ve allowed myself to explore the questions I have.” She went on to comment on purposes she had for writers with the final drafts of those essays: “I didn’t want to just state what I felt, but try to have the reader feel it as well. To have them realize something about their lives as they read of mine.” Such writing is valuable also for developing confidence in what one experiences as one’s “own ideas” and the confidence to include those ideas and experiences in writing about public issues, as Min-Zhan Lu is doing when she brings in personal experience in her article.

The relation of writing that renders experience to developing confidence is evident in the comments many students include in end-of-semester reflective essays. Here is one such comment:

Another characteristic of my writing that I’ve seen develop over the semester is my exploratory voice. I’m always questioning why? Why do I have stage fright? Why are children so violent? . . . When I was first asked to write about myself in our first essay, it made me scared. I had always shied away from writing about personal experiences. I have always loved writing fiction so that’s what I wrote for pleasure. Then in high school, all I ever wrote were documented papers, so my first thoughts of writing something personal made me skeptical and frightened. I don’t have that fear anymore, because by writing my essays this semester, I have learned how to write about my personal feelings.

Laurel Swetland

Two things interest me about this comment: Swetland links developing an “exploratory voice”—her term, not one I introduced—with gaining experience
with writing about personal experience; she also represents that false dichotomy that is ingrained in so many students: fiction and other creative writing where one’s imagination can come in versus “documented papers” and reports where one’s thoughts, let alone personal experience, are not to be included.

A student we wrote of in *Persons in Process* struggled with a variation of this dichotomy: the split created between writing that includes personal experience and academic writing; and, coupled with that split, the difference between everyday language and more specialized language of an academic discipline. Rachel was in another first-year writing course where “rendering” of experience was also valued. She chose to write a research essay on child abuse, an issue about which she had personal experience. In an early draft of the essay, she included reference to her own experience and that of a friend:

In none of our cases did we report our sufferings. We were scared, frighten, and petrified of our abusers. We were afraid that if we told we would not be helped, but only hurt more. Pushing our pain deep inside where no one can see it is a common defense mechanism. Why didn’t any of us run for help? There are many reasons. The bottom line is it hurts. It hurts unbelievably bad. . . . I think the part about being abused that hurts the most is that it came from people who said they loved me.

As she revised, Rachel wrote that section out of the essay and did not identify herself as one who had experienced abuse. Here Rachel is rendering her feelings as much as actual experiences: this is what it *feels* like to be me, and by implication, anyone who is abused. In another section that she deleted from the final draft, she renders more vividly experiences of her abuse. As she said in interview, writing about an issue that’s painful “is just another step in the process of understanding something that you want to understand” (267). When asked about including herself, she said, “I don’t know why I did that. That’s what made me want to write about it.” And she had authoritative knowledge about abuse. In the final draft, she omits direct references to herself but does write of her friend’s experiences, along with published scholarship on child abuse. In her end-of-semester portfolio review, Rachel comments about this essay:

I noticed that the sections of this essay that I added my own thoughts or explanations flowed better and were easily understood. When the time came to be factual, I had trouble incorporating my style and the information on psychological abuse. . . . The facts seemed to overshadow the point I was trying to make. (234)

In interview, Rachel added, “It was after that paper that I realized that I needed to change my style, and that I needed to learn how to incorporate the two. I think that’s something that’s going to have to come with time” (234).
In talking of style and “incorporating the two,” I believe Rachel is referring both to language and to a style of including personal knowledge and information from published research. I doubt she would have come to this realization had she not had the experience of being encouraged to try to bring the “two” together, to try to bridge that gap that is falsely created between personal and academic knowledge. It is significant to me that in her drafts she was not representing her experiences as detached examples, she was rendering them. Evoking the feel of those experiences in words helped her formulate her desire to be able to incorporate that knowledge.

And why does that matter in other than a psychological sense? Here’s what Rachel said her senior year:

Sometimes the way we experience things in the world isn’t exactly how theories explain things or how something you learn in class explains things. I think because we experience life differently, writing it down and saying “look, this is what the majority of people say, but this is what I found and this is maybe what people I have spoken to have found.”—even though that’s not written down anywhere, you can certainly make some valid points. (268–69)

In some instances, that may mean bringing in experiences and perspectives that have not been represented in academic writing. In “Telling Stories, Speaking Personally: Reconsidering the Place of Lived Experience in Writing,” Mahala and Swilky argue for a kind of storytelling that gives a “sociohistorical sense of experience,” particularly because it can serve to represent perspectives and “contextual conditions” that have often been suppressed (365). Mahala and Swilky also validate storytelling, specifically storytelling that aims to “write the self reflexively,” as an important starting point for fostering critical agency. “We contend that valuing stories as possible starting points for knowledge is more likely to foster critical agency of students than situating stories as cases awaiting critical ‘demystification’” (365, 377; see also Curtis et al. for a pedagogy that takes this approach). In this comment, they are distinguishing themselves from some sociocritical approaches that they see as placing experience in a subordinate or inferior position to an academic methodology or theory. Perhaps here is my reply to those who challenged the opening to Urban’s “Gone Fishin’” essay.

I thought of closing this essay by writing, as did the author of “Gone Fishin’,” that I’ve “made a great catch,” but that phrase feels a bit too exuberant (academic that I am) and also gives a mistaken impression that I’ve selected one thing instead of another. I do not mean to champion rendering experience as the sole focus of a composition course, but I do mean to argue against those who would make no room for it. Further, I aim to make a place for rendering of experience for personal
purposes, not solely for sociocultural critique or analysis and not always to view oneself as a product of cultural forces and discourses. I want to stress that I find both purposes equally viable, I am not valorizing one over the other.

As I hope the examples I have used have demonstrated, rendering of experience can be evident in an extended narrative or a few phrases of description: what is key is that a writer evoke an experience and the feel of being in it. This fishing expedition has led me to be more conscious than I was before of my purposes in designing exploratory writing and essay prompts that encourage rendering, whether for a personal essay, an autoethnography, or a research essay. I have two purposes in mind. One is to heighten students’ awareness that, in the act of writing, one is creating the experience, shaping it for present purposes under the influences of present perspectives. The second is to present rendering as an effort to achieve some understanding. That effort requires a reflexive and questioning stance, where one can trust in oneself: that is, trust in one’s ability to shape a provisional truth, not in one’s ability to uncover self-evident truths. Rendering fuels this questioning stance. Through rendering, one gets back into one’s memory enough to evoke feelings and complexities that prompt questioning and reflection. Those complexities are often ones that work not so much to confirm a static individual self as they do to open up instabilities and questions that prompt reflection, including cultural analysis.

In “Traditions and Professionalization: Reconceiving Work in Composition,” Bruce Horner argues against a utilitarian view of the aims of a composition course. Part of his argument includes arguing against the course as being defined solely in terms of service to academic courses. Citing Anne Gere’s study of writing in community-based writing workshops, including the Tenderloin Women’s Writing Workshop, he stresses the value of writing for “critical rethinking of one’s life experience and the culture at large” (392). Caroline Heller’s ethnography of the Tenderloin workshop, *Until We Are Strong Together*, shows the range of writing done by these women that renders their experiences: autobiographical writing, poetry, and fiction for intertwined purposes of affirming self, of commenting on social forces that shape lives, and of advocating for social change on such issues as homelessness, poor medical care, and racism. Through the many excerpts of their writing that she includes, Heller demonstrates her point that the power of their writing comes through the “worldviews” they express, “complete with ambiguity, conflict, and change, that held the life experience that could penetrate the surface of the institutionally known” (151). Mahala and Swilky make a similar point about the value of academic storytelling for bringing “what seems ‘outside’ into the academic game” (372).

For these reasons and others, writing to render one’s experience has a place in undergraduate education. Surely, many of us believe with Horner that an
undergraduate education should contribute to students’ developing understandings of themselves in relation to their past, their cultures, and in ways that tie past with present and future. We believe also in cultivating inclinations to reflecting, revising, viewing from multiple perspectives, and developing an “exploratory voice.” And, we should value students being able to bring their own authoritative knowledge from personal experience into academic writing, not as inferior to formalized theory and knowledge, but as equal; not as self-evident, but as partial and provisional and subject to critical reflection and revision, just as is formalized theory and knowledge.

I am working indirectly into an answer to those who questioned the “Gone Fishin’” essay at the writing-across-the-curriculum workshop. Instead of being defensive, I might have initiated a discussion of the role of personal experience, including writing that renders, in academic writing for professional work and undergraduate learning in disciplines across the curriculum. To launch the discussion, I might have mentioned the spiritual autobiography written in the Comparative Literature class. I might also have mentioned an assignment made in an Art History course to write about the art work in a medieval church as if one were living in that time and entering the church: in other words to render vicariously (Herrington and Curtis 240–41). Given discussions I’ve since had with other cross-disciplinary groups, I am confident other examples would arise from the group, as well as discussion and debate over the role of such writing for learning and professional work. Such discussions can only serve to widen understanding of purposes and limits of writing of personal experience, as well as of our disciplinary and personal perspectives. I do not feel that “rendering” of experience has a special purchase on knowledge, but it is a valid and important means of knowing, within and without academe. “When students leave the university unable to find words to render their experience, they are radically impoverished” (Elbow, “Reflections” 137).

They are radically impoverished while at the university as well, if they are cut off from a powerful way of continuing the ongoing work of composing themselves and, in relation to others, of bringing their knowledge to bear on topics pursued in their course work across disciplines and of affecting readers—entertaining, evoking those readers’ own self-reflections, prompting their thinking regarding issues of the world. I would like for all students who finish one of my writing courses to say, as one has said of her writing course, “You’re going to learn how to write. I think you learn about yourself too. And I think this all goes into the whole idea of college to broaden your mind” (Herrington and Curtis 220).