“Reading and thinking have no use; plowing your field will bring you food,” said most farmers to their children in a little village in the far-eastern region of India where my family had migrated from an equally remote village in western Nepal. Coming from a social background like this, I always recognized learning to read and write as the absolute means for personally escaping poverty, attaining the highest level of formal education, and eventually being connected again with those once-isolated communities that I had left behind seemingly for good. But it was only about three decades since I first learned to read and write (in English, alongside a variety of local languages) that I first seriously thought about the role of literacy in broader, societal terms.

I first encountered the term literacy in the context of writing a “literacy narrative” assignment while pursuing my second master’s degree in English at the University of Louisville. Intriguingly, the fact that I had an eventful story about becoming literate didn’t help me write (about) that story. In this literacy narrative, I reflect on how that assignment in graduate school changed from a confusing task to an exciting window through which I began to look into the intellectual and epistemological bases of education in the United States. While doing so, I also briefly discuss the pedagogical implications of using

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literacy narratives for the teaching of writing in the context of increasingly “globalized” classrooms.

The assignment was part of a “teaching first-year composition” seminar, and I wanted to reflect on my literacy story in the context of teaching writing. But my attempts to connect the two worlds of learning resulted in a debilitating writer’s block: I couldn’t make sense of my literacy story in the new context. In Nepal and India, I had only learned to “learn by heart” whatever the books said and to demonstrate that understanding in examinations. Even as an English teacher for more than a decade in Nepal, I had never gone as far as asking students to reflect on and say something in their own voice about how they learned to read and write. No one younger and less experienced than published authors presumed to think about creating “new” ideas, contributing to recognized bodies of knowledge, or “owning” their own ideas—not to mention “inventing” anything new/unique about the apparently mundane topic of reading and writing itself.

I kept listing events after events from my experience of learning to read and write, but I couldn’t develop a logical framework in which to fit the narrative material. I had overcome many obstacles in order to make learning possible at all, such as dropping out of school because my parents didn’t believe that higher education would be worth the investment, displacement of family from east India due to an ethnic conflict leading to another near end of academic pursuit, an unprecedented change of major from engineering to English literature at the beginning of college, and a literal escape from home to finish the undergraduate degree. But I had never looked at learning itself and made any value judgment about what it meant in sociocultural, political, or epistemological terms. I couldn’t develop an intellectual perspective by drawing on the knowledge base of society, culture, and academic discipline in and for which I wanted to now write. After procrastinating until the night before the assignment was due, I somehow wrote an essay that did tell a kind of literacy story but lacked relevant substance and focus.

That incident prompted me to later study the scholarship on the genre of literacy narrative as the subject of my MA thesis. I used qualitative methods to analyze and compare literacy narratives written by students in different cultures. The primary data set was a collection of assignments written by students here in the United States.

I was surprised to find out that writing scholars in the United States are divided on whether literacy narratives can help engage students in meaningful intellectual exercise. Proponents suggest that literacy narrative assignments
can be used for enhancing students' epistemological agency through a process of reflection about the nature of knowledge and learning (Corkey; Nicolini; Royer; Soliday; Willard-Traub). Kara Poe Alexander summarizes this side of the scholarship in a recent *College Composition and Communication* article, “Success, Victims, Prodigies: ‘Master’ and ‘Little’ Cultural Narratives in the Literacy Narrative Genre.” By analyzing how students draw on both the “master” narrative in which “literacy equals success” and the “little” narratives that allow more “local, more specific, narratives of literacy that contrast with and challenge the master narratives” (Lyotard, cited in Alexander 612), the author also demonstrates the benefits of using literacy narratives effectively in the writing classroom.

On the other side of the debate are scholars who argue that literacy narrative assignments basically force students to buy into prevailing hegemony, essentially perpetuating the power structure of discourse and epistemology in the society (Eldred and Mortensen; France; Grady; Karls; and Williams “Heroes”). Some of these scholars (e.g., Grady; Williams, “Speak”) also extend the critique to the political and postcolonial/imperial domain. For instance, Grady states that “composition's focus on personal, expressivist writing, which . . . reflects an individualistic ideology, conflicts with ideologies of collectivity common in non-Western cultures” (14). These critical views about the genre's use as a college writing assignment were reflected among many writing teachers in the United States, who seemed to believe that the genre stymies students' creativity by prompting/allowing them to adopt popular narrative schemas, fill in some details, and complete the writing without sufficient intellectual engagement.

While some scholars (such as Morris Young) directly address cross-cultural issues, there was (and still is) not much scholarship situating literacy narratives in the context of globalization, transnational writing contexts, and classrooms filled with students from around the world. In the rest of this brief piece, I discuss a few benefits of using the genre for teaching writing in multicultural, globalized, and—in the context of teaching writing online—transnational contexts.

While I found little scholarship on this genre from outside the United States, comparisons of student writing in related genres of narrative from other countries or cultures showed how writing about literacy experiences reveals underlying cultural differences. Student writing about reading and writing from different cultures reflected how the individual's epistemological independence, agency, and authority are viewed in their societies. For example, as pointed out by David Dzaka, traditional African cultures tend not to regard the individual
learner or writer as an agent, creator, or owner of knowledge, when compared to Western cultures; the same is the case with Asian cultures in general. As shown in the famous CCC article written by Fan Shen, Chinese students often find it hard to put into practice “rule number one” of English composition—“be yourself”—because “for a long time, the words ‘self’ and ‘individualism’ have had negative connotations in my mind” (460). Brenda Dyer and Lee Friedrich similarly show a contrast between Japanese and American cultures in terms of manipulation of experience to impose meaning, use of sensory descriptions as a resource for writing, and the degree of explicitness of argument/ideas.

While cultures overlap with others, constantly change, and cannot be generalized, students in any culture are prone to adopting available patterns of meaning (with less experienced writers adopting the least complicated options). But it is also natural for learners to think and learn by using such socially and culturally constructed schemas. As Mark Schorer has pointed out in an article titled “The Necessity of Myth,” borrowing and using locally available structures is a universal feature of any act of meaning making. So when one crosses social, cultural, political, and epistemological borders, one finds it hard to use new structures for narrative materials from a different society. The differences in learning style due to underlying cultural values are suggestive of the different degrees to which different cultures value the individual’s independence, agency, and authority over knowledge. Consequently, deliberate pedagogical effort to highlight these differences can help students understand and navigate the epistemological landscape of the new academe.

While students who come from different cultural and academic backgrounds may at first find the literacy narrative challenging to write, this assignment is also extremely useful as a means for helping them unpack cultural and epistemological assumptions, values, and beliefs inherent in both the previous and the new academic contexts. Such unpacking can help students from different backgrounds learn about the broader and more complex aspects of reading, research, and writing in the academy. In fact, if writing teachers help students recognize all the “narratives” that they write—in the broad sense of the term and in ways that would include scientific articles as well as personal narratives in the composition classroom—then students could learn that all...
forms of “literacy [are] multiple, contextual, and ideological” (Daniell 403). They would also learn the underlying assumptions that individuals acquire, own, judge, and generate knowledge—which are part of the individualistic culture that has thrived under a democratic society and capitalistic economy.

As a writing teacher in the United States today, I realize that my difficulty came from a failure to transition from one cultural-epistemological view of reading and writing to another. That story of failure serves as an insight for me to help students learn about the epistemological underpinnings of US higher education. Especially when teaching academic writing—ranging from the simplest tasks like reading responses to more complex assignments like the master’s thesis—to international students, I explicitly discuss what it means in this academic culture to “create new knowledge” (and not just read and demonstrate an understanding of what established knowledge makers have said). Given that the number of students coming into the US academe from other countries and cultures is rapidly increasing, such an approach is more and more useful (and necessary) for writing teachers. It has become more important that we also teach the idea of “knowledge making” through different genres of writing in different disciplines.

Literacy narratives are not just a series of events: more so than other types of narratives, they are frames of meaning that are culturally situated and epistemologically significant. As Michael Bamberg argued in “Positioning between Structure and Performance,” in order to understand (or write) narratives, one must ask “how characters are positioned in relation to one another within the reported events,” how narrators position themselves in relation to the audience, how narrators position themselves in relation to themselves, and what linguistic means and discourse modes are employed to do all of the above (337). So, the difficulty that students from different cultures have in telling the “story” of their learning to read and write often has to do with the difficulty of switching from what Cynthia Selfe calls the conventional structuralist view of narrative (focusing on just the shape of events) to what she calls the “third wave in narrative studies.” This approach demands that students “analyze” their literate experiences with a “focus on how [they are] tied in fundamental ways to culture, meaning, knowledge, identity formation and transformation” (n. pag.).

In short, both from personally crossing a gap between two worldviews about literacy and from studying and reflecting on how literacy stories allow individuals to understand those worldviews, I have learned that writing “about”
the experience of learning to read and write can greatly promote students’ development of critical sensibilities, capacity for intellectual judgment, independence as writers and makers of knowledge, self-confidence and self-respect, and, in short, their epistemological agency. The educational and pedagogical significance of these affordances that the literacy narrative provides as a teaching tool is enormous, especially for the “globalized” classrooms where we teach writing today—whether it is onsite or across cultural and national borders, online.

Works Cited


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**Ghanashyam Sharma**

Ghanashyam Sharma teaches writing and rhetoric at Stony Brook University (SUNY). His research and teaching interests include writing in the disciplines, academic transition and success of international students, multimodal composition, and cross-cultural rhetoric.