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The Narrating Subject: Student Reflection on Witness Narrative

Kathleen Zuanich Young

Western Washington University, kathleen.young@wwu.edu

Francesca Leaf

Western Washington University

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Researchers' Names and Department:

Dr. Kathleen Zuanich Young & Francesca Leaf, Anthropology

Title of Study:

The Narrating Subject: Student Reflection on Witness Narrative

Research Question:

Can reflective writing capture the process of thinking when students read or listen to a first person narrative involving a Holocaust Survivor, a combat veteran, a former child soldier, clinical depression, and post-traumatic stress? Is the cognitive/affective capacity made visible as the student becomes a narrating subject his or her self in response to trauma and recovery narrative?

Method:

The research was conducted in Dr. Young's Winter Quarter 2011 Anthropology senior capstone course Cross-Cultural Trauma and Recovery. Prior to beginning research, approval was obtained from the IRB. We also obtained consent from the students participating in the course.

Within Cross-Cultural Trauma and Recovery, as a low-stakes writing assignment, students kept electronic journals on Blackboard where they responded to first-person narratives of trauma and recovery. The students had the option of making their journals visible to the other students, or to only share their reflections with us. Students were instructed to write in their journals on a weekly basis, but most students wrote in their journal twice a week. The journals were dialogue style, where we responded to the student entries, answering questions or participating with the students in responding to the survivor narratives. The students were instructed that the journals were to be academic and to combine the affective (emotional) with the cognitive (intellectual).

The literature surrounding narratives of trauma and recovery illustrate that it can be challenging to articulate painful experiences, including the physical, mental and emotional. Pain actively resists and sometimes destroys human language, thus it can be challenging for many survivors of trauma to translate their experiences into the spoken or written word. Literature also discusses that when people listen to or read first person narratives of trauma and recovery that they become what is referred to as "secondary victims" and participate actively in the survivor's process of bearing witness. Thus, this silence and "language loss" experienced by survivors is often transferred to the individuals that listen to or read first person narratives of trauma and recovery. Many studies suggest that the process of articulating trauma can be therapeutic and

that when individuals share their stories that they are able to externalize the pain that is carried within the body and thus begin to objectify and analyze the trauma; as stated by scholar Nancy Mairs: “[c]atastrophe tends to be composed not of a monolithic event but of a welter of little incidents . . . and language, in ordering these into recognizable patterns, counteracts disorientation and disintegration”. Hence, through analyzing the student journals this research hopes to identify how the students experience the survivor narratives and participate in the process of bearing witness. We also explore the impacts this process of articulation has on their writing. To identify these aspects of the electronic journals, we are applying textual analysis to the entries and through the process of memoing we are coding for common patterns which will allow us to identify common themes and experiences in the student responses.

Key Findings:

Preliminary results show that common themes expressed in the journals are: 1) Students expressing concern that through the process of articulation that they may become desensitized to the subject matter. Thus, they share concern that through writing and speaking about the unspeakable they may normalize trauma. 2) Students expressing the challenges of reconciling the seemingly paradoxical nature of humankind – how everyday people can commit terrible atrocities. When reflecting on this issue students also discussed the challenges they faced in finding the words to discuss this topic. 3) Students also commonly reflected on the therapeutic aspects of writing and speaking about trauma and the course content.

Implications for Teaching and Learning:

In regards to writing, we found that through the process of electronic journaling that students were able to practice writing about new and often incomprehensible topics. Thus, they were able to practice reflecting on and processing what they were learning and became prepared for larger course assignments, such as a capstone research paper and presentation. The process of reflecting and writing also aided students in identifying larger themes in the course.

We believe that weekly low-stakes reflective writing assignments would transfer well to nearly any course, as they create a safe space for students to share any challenges they are facing or new ideas or insights that they have about course content. The process of dialoguing with an instructor or teaching assistant can also help create a space for collaborative learning, co-inquiry and voicing questions or concerns.

Implications for Further Study:

The course opens students’ minds to aspects of the human experience they may not have encountered; war, violence, forced collaboration with the committing of atrocities and killing. These traumatic events are embodied in the narratives of real people that the student is introduced to, making the subjects real and processual, not bounded in time.

Our study examines the relationship between theory and practice evidenced in student blogs in response to the materials. The course prepares students to think critically about the use of hegemonic structures that inculcate violence and/or trauma by situating the subject in front of them. Students engage in an authentic learning experience that stimulates both affective and cognitive growth. The result is that students evaluate their lives and their goals with the stated intention of applying this knowledge to their own future endeavors.

A longitudinal study that follows these students over time to see what they remember five years after the course and what they have done with that knowledge would be most instructive. Replication of the project next year will allow a comparison with previous classes. The use of new technologies involving the internet and the immediacy of blogging may have implications for understanding the uses of trauma narratives in education.