



## Using Narrative Assignments in the Classroom: Teacher and Student Reflections

*This article reports on the experience of using narrative assignments in graduate education. A teacher (John Kayser) and three students—two from social work (Laura Buchanan and Lynn Halfmann) and one from education (Michele Coates)—share their narratives and reflections on the opportunities and limitations the assignment afforded in their learning and subsequent professional development. Sharing this work may be helpful to others seeking to incorporate narratives into the classroom. Boundary roles and confidentiality issues this type of assignment raises are examined.*

by  
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"The experiences of the first three years of life are almost entirely lost to us, and when we attempt to enter a small child's world, we come as foreigners who have forgotten the landscape and no longer speak the native tongue."

—Selma Fraiberg

### Teacher's Reflections: Purpose and Structure of the Assignment

For the past several years, I have included a narrative assignment in a graduate social work course on the assessment and interventions with children. The assignment originated as a brief in-class exercise done near the start of the course. Students were asked to bring an artifact or memory from childhood to share and compare their experiences with a small group of classmates as part of an effort to build a community of learners (Kayser, 1995). Subsequently, the assignment evolved and became more formal and lengthy. Students were asked to write a mid-term, first-person childhood narrative of a meaningful event, experience, or formative period in their development.

The purpose was to share something about their childhood that they valued and treasured now, and which they can draw on in understanding their *current* work with children. There are several underlying benefits of this type of narrative assignment:

First, narratives help students decenter from their own culturally and cognitively bound experience as adults. How adults view children is decidedly different from how children view themselves and/or us—the adult world. Adultcentrism (Petr, 1992; Tyson, 1995) is a concept which suggests that adults working with children often fail to recognize that we are viewing them from our adult perspective—the perspective of our big adult shoes, clumping around noisily, intruding in their world, probably trampling on things precious to them. Adultcentrism represents all those things about childhood that we were taught to "grow out of" in our hurried march towards the promised land of adult privileges and responsibilities. Unless students work to obtain a *passport* (Anthony, 1964) allowing them to



travel respectfully and humbly in children's world (as good travelers do in unfamiliar lands), they are unlikely to be effective.

Second, narratives help students recapture and reconnect to a source of expertise they bring to this course—their own experience of childhood. Often, however, in the haste or necessity to grow up, many of us have forgotten our own best source of wisdom—the language, culture, and lived experience of childhood. Thus, the narrative assignment reflects a central premise in my approach to teaching this course—to be an effective worker with children one must reconnect to personal childhood experiences (Gardner, 1975) as a means of preparing ourselves to see the world of our current child clients from *their* perspectives. Then we can integrate this with adult knowledge about children (i.e., theories about child development, knowledge of child behavioral disorders, child and family counseling techniques) into a more effective whole.

Third, narratives help students gain an appreciation for the storied nature of human experience and the value of stories as a therapeutic medium through which to do child work. (In addition to the narrative assignments, I incorporate children's literature, stories, and biblio-therapy approaches into the course on a regular basis.) While the course also stresses the importance of mastering other types of professional writing, such as the objectively written comprehensive assessment

or intervention report, I believe exposure to the first-person written narrative is important in direct work with children. Learning the importance of time, context, characters, and plot in constructing their own narratives helps students in using the narrative metaphor in their direct practice (Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1994). In addition, narratives help students become more sensitive in examining the meta-level stories of race, class, and gender through which individual life stories are lived (Laird, 1998).

Because students often are unfamiliar with and/or uncertain about using the narrative genre in academic papers, the assignment is structured in several ways. I begin by providing a handout with several quotations from a cross-section of writers (encompassing the fields of biography, fiction, psychological theory and research, child development, and child therapy) offering diverse perspectives on children, the experiences of childhood, and the use of narratives. I hope this handout will serve as a nutrient or catalyst for their own reflections. A sample of quotations is as follows:

1. The child psychoanalyst, Bruno Bettelheim, says that the single most important quality a helping adult must have in working with troubled children is the capacity to empathically be in touch with the experience of his/her own childhood. In his book, *The Empty Fortress* (1967), he states: "Much of

modern psychology seeks to know about others; too much of it, in my opinion, without an equal commitment to knowing the self. But I believe that knowing the other—which is different from knowing about the other—can only be a function of knowing oneself."

2. "The more time you spend with children, the more you notice how they explore the world and the acuteness with which they think about the most subtle things—things which escape materiality, easy recognition, definite forms, the laws of invariance—things one can touch but can't touch, that brush against the real and the imaginary, that have something of the mysterious about them and provide wide margins for interpretation." (Guido Petter's *The Hundred Languages of Children*, 1998).
3. "What sets one Southern town apart from another, or from a Northern town or hamlet, or city high-rise? The answer must be the experience between the unknowing majority (it) and the knowing minority (you). All of childhood's unanswered questions must finally be passed back to the town and answered there. Heroes and bogey men, values and dislikes, are first encountered and labeled in that early environment. In later years, they change



faces, places, and maybe races, tactics, intensities, and goals, but beneath those penetrable masks they wear forever the stocking capped faces of childhood" (Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, 1969).

4. "But people are always speculating—why am I as I am? To understand that of any person, his whole life, from birth, must be reviewed. All of our experiences fuse into our personality. Everything that ever happened to us is an ingredient" (Alex Haley's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 1964).
5. "Recent work following girls into adolescence has explained. . . that girls move from a rich relational world of childhood in which it is possible to express the full range of human feelings, into a culture of constraining conventions of femininity that pressures girls to narrow their feelings and to modulate their voices. Young children tell psychologically astute stories of human relationships, rendering in exquisite detail their connections with themselves and with others. A struggle breaks out at the edge of adolescence, however, when these same girls are encouraged to disconnect from their knowledge, to see and hear the world largely as it has been seen and spoken about by men. What girls knew in child-

hood seems as if it cannot be known, and what girls want to say suddenly seems unspeakable. . . . Many girls struggle to remain connected to their childhood knowledge, actively resisting repressive conventions of femininity and fighting openly for authentic relationships" (Annie Rogers, Lyn Brown, & Mark Tappan's "Interpreting Loss in Ego Development in Girls: Regression or Resistance," in *The Narrative Study of Lives: Exploring Identity and Gender*, vol. 3, 1994).

6. "The therapist must have the capacity to project himself into the child's situation, to see the world through the child's eyes—and probably to feel the way the child feels. . . . We use such terms as sympathy and empathy in our feeble attempts to describe this quality, but we still have much to learn about it. . . . Does an accurate memory of one's own childhood play a role in this capacity? I think so, but as far as I know this has not been tested. . . . Egocentrism may inhibit this quality. . . . The therapist who lacks this quality to a significant degree is ill equipped to help his patient. If he cannot see the world through his patient's eyes (not necessarily agree with the patient, however) then he is handicapped in helping him" (From Richard Gardner's *Psychotherapeutic Approaches to the Resistant Child*, 1975).

After allowing a few moments for students to read the handout, I outline the parameters of the assignment. I stress that students should share only what they feel comfortable with others knowing. I acknowledge that some students come from difficult childhood experiences, and that the assignment is not meant to force unplanned disclosure of painful material. What students choose to share is honored and treated confidentially, to be read only by me. In addition, I state that the grading of the narrative is not based on the content of the life experience being shared, but on their ability to construct a narrative addressing questions such as: "Do your recollections shape or inform your understanding of yourself?" "Do they help you understand others?" "Can you draw on these recollections in understanding your current work with children?"

Finally, I read students an excerpt from a first-person childhood narrative constructed by a student from a previous section of the course. (This sample is drawn from Michele Coates' childhood narrative which is contained in the student narrative section below). The excerpt is offered as an example and model of the type of learning I hope the narrative assignment will facilitate for them. After reading the excerpt, students discuss their reactions to the assignment, which helps to air any remaining anxieties or concerns they may have about completing the assignment. Then, they have about three weeks to write the assignment.



As course instructor, I have found the results of this assignment to be very gratifying. Students have described an incredible variety of childhood experiences—some growing up in apartments in large urban areas, some in mid-western rural settings, some in small towns on the coast, some on western cattle ranches, some in international settings. In the section which follows, three students have agreed to share their narratives. At the time of this writing, Laura Buchanan and Lynn Halfmann are second-year masters students in the University of Denver Graduate School of Social Work. Michele Coates graduated in 1996 from the Child and Family Studies Program (College of Education), and currently is working as an early childhood intervention and community coordinator with families in Denver for the Colorado State Department of Education.

These particular stories were selected because they embody a number of exemplary narrative elements. The stories are beautifully written—evocatively and creatively recalling the perceptions, experiences, and reminiscences students had during childhood. In addition, the three narratives describe a wide range of childhood experiences: narratives of exuberance and happy growth; narratives of challenges and obstacles; narratives of oppression and resilience; narratives of stability; narratives of displacement and transition. Further, the narratives are sensitive to the impact of race, gender, and

class on the individual life experience, providing a transparent window through which the working of these forces momentarily can be observed. Finally, each narrative shows how the students related their childhood experience to present work with children in social work or education. The narratives offer original insights on working with children in a variety of practice settings.



### Student Narratives

Laura Buchanan—  
"My Experience of Childhood"

I am one of those lucky people who can say that I had a wonderful childhood. To this day, my memories are a comfort to me, and unfortunately it seems like everything was better when I was kid. When I was a child, I was more free to fully experience my emotions, and everything had a dreamy, magic quality to it. I didn't really know pain or regret, and there never seemed to be any real responsibilities. Playing was my number one priority, and this was encouraged by adults. Perhaps the only damaging thing that I was exposed to were sexist stereotypes and gender roles. Still, my memories of childhood are very positive, and gave me a foundation for viewing the world as a generally safe and fair place where most people can be trusted.

I can remember thinking

of my parents as the greatest people in the world. They were infallible. My mom was the most loving and beautiful person in the world, and my dad was strong, hard-working, and handsome. I thought that they were happily married (they divorced when I was 17), and my brother and I were well provided for. Whenever my parents got mad at me, it was like they would become totally different, mean people. This did not fit in with my idealized image of my parents, so I had to have a dichotomy of good parent/bad parent instead of seeing them for who they really were. As I became a teenager, I shed this image very quickly, but it was difficult to lose these perfect people who took care of my every need (almost). My paternal grandparents lived four hours away, but they were close and very involved with my brother and me. It was like I had a second set of parents close by to satisfy me in any area my parents couldn't.

Friendship in childhood is much different than it is now. I would sometimes take baths with close friends, we would sleep over in the same bed, and we would hang out for days until we got sick of each other and separate for a night. Arguments could be very painful, and very petty as well. There was no attempt to be polite, and hurt feelings were not your problem unless an adult guilt-tripped you. The best friends I had as a kid are nothing like adult friendships. They just seemed to happen, and they revolved around fun and games.



I miss the frequency in which my friends and I would laugh until our stomachs hurt and tears would roll down our cheeks.

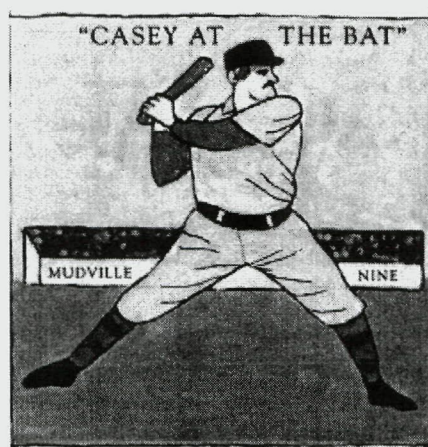
I also remember how impressionable I was as a kid. I would believe anything I was told, including Santa Claus and the stork, and everything was a template for letting my imagination run wild. I remember wishing that I had magical powers, or that I could transform into a cat or a dolphin. I would see a movie, and it would be in my head for days and weeks. This was sometimes a bad thing because a scary movie would keep me up at night and cause me to be afraid of creatures in the closet, underneath the bed, and outside my window at night. I'm glad I have outgrown that childhood feature.

I learned a lot about myself growing up as a girl in Texas. This seemed to determine so much of what I could do and who I could be. Toys, TV shows, shoes, bikes, bedspreads, activities, language, almost everything seemed to designate as either a boy thing or a girl thing. I always thought that girls were being shafted, and hated the toys and clubs that girls were supposed to be involved in. My brother did boy scouts and I tried girl scouts but quit after our camping trip was changed into a downtown shopping spree in Dallas.

The toys I was supposed to play with were Barbie and Strawberry Shortcake, but baking plastic cakes and dressing-up the doll got old really quick. I remember my mom giving me

a big Barbie head, so that I could practice putting makeup on it and styling its hair. Somehow this toy wasn't stimulating enough. My brother always had better toys in his room. He had a wind-up Evil Knievil stuntman doll that would go flying around on its motorcycle like a bat out of hell, and he had the Millennium Falcon "Star Wars" spaceship that would make cool noises, flash lights, and open up to carry figurines.

Whenever relatives would come over, they would say something like, "You're gettin' so pretty, we're gonna have to get a stick to chase the boys away." I would just blush and get embarrassed. My brother would get quizzed on sports trivia and be told how smart he was. I never thought that I was smart compared to him, but maybe no one took the time to really notice if I was as smart.



I sometimes wished that I could be a boy, because they seemed to be so much more important. They were always the heroes or main characters in movies, TV, or books. Whenever female characters were represented, they were usually blond and extremely pretty. I grew up

thinking that the only way to have power as a woman was to be pretty and to have large breasts. I feared becoming a woman, because I was afraid that I would not grow up to be pretty. I also thought that it would just be a stupid world of hair, make-up, bras, and boyfriends.

Texas is probably not the most empowering place to learn about female gender roles. Dallas as a city seemed so proud of the fact that it had so many blond, leggy, and large breasted women. There were many strip clubs all over the city, beauty pageants were big, and the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders were worshipped by all ages. I did not have many strong female role models growing up. The only one I really remember was Olivia Newton-John and her performance in "Grease." In this movie, all she had to do was wear tight leather pants, tease her hair, and start smoking, and John Travolta fell madly in love with her. Maybe this movie wasn't such a good influence.

When I was eleven years-old, our family was transferred to Michigan, and that is where my childhood ended. I was a relatively popular girl in Texas, and I had a pretty healthy self-esteem. The new neighborhood that my family moved to was very wealthy, and I was not well received by my classmates there. I think that they saw me as a Southern hick. I spoke with a Southern drawl, and I wore all of the wrong clothes. My classmates would ask me how many cars our family had, how many bedrooms were in our house, and they would lift up my shirt



to see what kinds of jeans I was wearing. I wasn't ridiculed but I knew I wasn't accepted, and this was deeply painful to me. I remember going home from school, crawling into my bed, and crying. I thought that it would be worth it to give up my leg if I could go back to my friends in Plano, Texas. I became a much more shy and independent person after that, and I began to think that I am somehow different than everyone else. Eventually I made wonderful friends, and now I am thankful that I got out of the South at the age I did.

To this day, I think I have retained a good deal of my childhood creativity and I find that my "right-brain" style comes in handy when relating to children. I seem to have an easy time facilitating play and getting lost in kids' imaginations. Since my childhood was stable and happy, I may have a difficult time knowing what it must be like for a young child to be dealing with loss, trauma, or difficult emotions. I didn't experience any hardships until I became a teenager, so it may be a stretch for me to know how this would impact a child's world. Also, I will always be sensitive to gender roles and their influence on young children, especially girls. Sexism was an issue for me growing up, and I wish I could prevent it from limiting and taking away from girls and boys growing up today. All and all, I see childhood as a happy time, and this may be one reason why I enjoy working with children and letting myself climb back into their world.



Michele Coates—

"Perspectives of a Childhood  
Journey: Connections and  
Unwritten Chapters"

I remember the four-hour drive home to the small blue-collar town in southern Colorado where my extended family lived. I know every twist of the highway and each cluster of trees in the Black Forest. I remember the snowstorms on Monument Hill and the summer rain that made the last five miles slippery and endless. I have often done this drive in my sleep seeking out the comfort of my memories. Childhood summers and holidays were divided between my parents' large and boisterous families. Eight blocks apart, they both lived in the lower eastside of a predominantly working class steel town. The orange glow from the graveyard shift at the mill cast strange shadows on a seven-year-old's night-time sky watch. These two families blended together into a crazy whirlwind of aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents. I was the first-born grandchild on both sides of the family. My birth was celebrated, they like to tell me, for three days. I was treasured, indulged, and loved throughout my childhood and adolescence. My second home was a rich intermingling of two deeply traditional cultures. My paternal grandparents were first generation Italian-Americans. My maternal grandparents are His-

panic-Americans. At the age of eight I could fluently insult anyone in three languages. I felt connected, surrounded, and completely immersed within a family, a community, and a culture.

My great-aunt Bess lived in the old family farmhouse that had belonged to my Nana (paternal great-grandmother). Each summer, six (of over twenty-five) first cousins and I would plan the great sleep-over. The house, filled with beautiful old furniture, black and white photographs of solemn-faced people, and antique clothes, was like a great imaginary castle through the eyes of a child—with fantastic props ready-made. It would not have been complete without my Aunt's fat wiener dog, Pepe, rock-hard marshmallows, and the ice cream kept in the 1920s freezer. Inevitably, we would feed the dog twenty or so marshmallows just to watch it throw up under the large four-poster brass bed where we all slept. I was the ring-leader, being the oldest, and I often negotiated our way in and out of trouble. Aunt Bess was a retired dietitian from the State Hospital and had what seemed to a seven-year-old hundreds of white uniforms hanging in the damp and very dark cellar of the house. One morning, seven little girls reverently took down a coat from its wire hanger and immediately transformed into Marie Curie. We had the power to change the world and cure the sick with just one tiny sip of our magic potions. If we could only talk Dina (the youngest cousin) into



drinking them, the world would be in our little hands. We systematically waited, like sneak-thieves, until Aunt Bess went outside to water the eggplant and romas (tomatoes). The cousins promptly locked the door and strategically stuffed rocks, juice, milk, kool-aid, marshmallows, paper—everything (and anything) we could find—into the ancient blender and pressure cooker. There was a marvelous array of color, debris, and one extremely angry Italian great-aunt when we had finally finished. My ears still burn with the fluidity and creative twist of Sicilian and English profanity in perfect iambic pentameter.

The Star Bar, a local joint around the corner from my grandparents' house, has the hottest green chili, the cheapest beer, and the best conversation in town. My Grandpa Victor spent every Friday afternoon sampling their offerings. Every other Friday, during the summer when Grandma had church, I would go along. We each had a "slopper" (open-faced hamburger smothered in green chili), a Pepsi in the bottle for me, and a large foamy draft for Grandpa. We would talk about the Broncos, the best fly-fishing spots on the Arkansas River, and tell jokes. My Grandfather repeated the same six jokes over and over. Each time I would laugh like I had never heard it before. Then, after a beer or two, Grandpa would begin to tell the stories. He would weave incredible tales about the Co-Co man, a mythological Spanish bogey-man, who rode empty

train cars and liked to eat small children with bad manners. My favorite story was about a crying woman, la Llrona, who had lost her baby to the evil spirits of the Rio-Grande River. She walks up and down the riverbed wailing and looking for her lost child. Grandpa Vic still claims her tears can be tasted, even today, in the fresh flesh of a river trout. We had a ritual for coming home. He would wash my face and hands with a drink napkin, and remind me that the Star Bar was our little secret. We would walk down to the corner market and eat strawberry ice cream cones and drink a glass of warm water. This was important, he said, to keep the stomach from becoming too cold and inviting evil spirits to dance within the body.

Working with children constantly challenges my ability to wonder. It re-attaches the magic of childhood often lost in the adult perspective. My own childhood stories are endless, I draw upon them vigilantly as a constant reminder of what play, imagination, and exploration are really all about. My work within the Head Start agency (parent organization, Child Opportunity Program) has placed, front and center, children with various needs into my care. I assess the developmental process of both the child and the family. I visit children in their home environment and encourage a lasting bond between educator and family of mutual trust and respect. I attempt to educate the parent through the child about the child developmental process, furnish a stimulating

and safe environment for these children to grow and experiment, and provide a connection to community resources when needed. I am truly amazed at just how much I enjoy the process. I embrace each family and child's individual experience as part of a continual educational workshop to improve my understanding of human development. What better way to spend the day than dressing up, finger painting, and building great imaginary cities out of blocks, only to knock them down and begin again?

Every August, I sit down to write a short and extremely personal statement concerning my philosophy of child development. I post this on the door to my classroom. I spend an inordinate amount of time reflecting upon my own childhood story. I draw upon several key factors: the stability and security of my environment, cultural and ethnic experiences which augment my connection to community and self-worth, the act of play as a stepping stone for mastery of interpersonal skills, and the sheer joy in exploration. I hope, with this incredibly short statement, to express the validity and importance of protecting the development of each individual child's story. I attempt throughout the course of the school year to actively recruit parents to join the children in the classroom. I ask them to get on their knees and play in the dirt, sand, or soap with their children. I encourage extended family members to have lunch or attend a teddy bear tea party in our land of make-believe. We have guest



story-tellers from the community to share an experience, folktale, or memory. These story-tellers are regularly extended family members and community helpers. We create a class journal noting our important discoveries large and small. I frequently send home imagination pamphlets, which stress language development as a motivation for parent-child play interaction. Monthly pot-luck lunches welcome families to bring cultural foods and music into the classroom arena where it has always belonged and is often ignored. In almost every dimension of my work with children and families, I remember the comfort of my childhood home. My objective then becomes a synthesis with the children, their families and needs, and the joint construction of an environment in which they can feel safe to explore, challenge, and create.

The experience of childhood helps pull together an extremely operational format for working with children as an adult educator and facilitator. It reinforces my belief in maintaining a fundamental understanding of where each child begins and an acceptance of their individual journey. It is tremendously exhausting, trying, and emotionally draining to work in an atmosphere where children are often lacking some basic building block like food or shelter. Sometimes my only goal can be to provide a safe haven for these children (food, heat, or love) in four-hour stretches. Five days a week, I can create a tangible place for them, where

the magic of the childhood story richly unfolds and travels to unknown and unwritten chapters. Their journey belongs to our future.



Lynn Halfmann—  
"Memory One:  
Rock-Powder"

**S**crape-scrape, scrape-scrape, scrape-scrape is the rhythmic sound of the rock grinding against the square slab of concrete. I kneel with my feet tucked under my rear like an Indian woman grinding corn on her rock. My arms are stiff as they extend to my hands which carefully hold the rock so it glides forcefully, yet smoothly, against the concrete. I am rocking back and forth in a steady motion, applying even pressure to promote the most efficient powder production.

Each rock that I grind is a different color, and has been gathered from various areas of my neighborhood. As I am rocking, I am falling away from the consciousness of the task at hand. I am thinking, daydreaming, unconsciously rotating the rock as not to grind at my fingertips. I do this for hours, stopping only to notice: "Ooh, this is a beautiful color powder, this will do very well in that particular magic potion." I am in my secret hide-out. I don't know who developed it, but it is in the far back left corner of my yard. Someone cleared out a space in the middle of a bunch of bushes and trees. Then they placed seven cinder-sized concrete

blocks in a row down the middle. They are perfect for sitting on and having conferences. The slab that I use to grind on is a flat two-foot-by-three-foot slab. It sits right outside the entrance to the hid-out like a pedestal or an alter in a shrine.

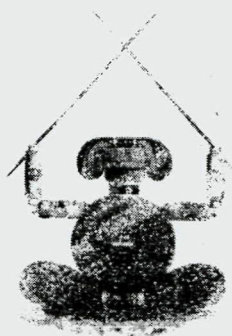
I love to compare the different softnesses and colors of the rock powders as they fall through my hands like silk. I stick a wet finger into each pile and taste them, expecting to taste a difference. (Yes, I ate rocks as a child.) I sandwich-bag each type separately and seal it with a twist-tie, for use in later potions. The one mixture that I vividly remember making was a "dandelion killer" poison. It contained various items such as dirt, sticks, rock-powder, water, plants, berries, etc. I remember carefully compiling this mixture with a friend of mine in the back yard, as if I really knew what I was doing, and had used it before with great success. Then we ran around the yard pouring just the right amount on each dandelion.

"Memory Two:  
Breathing in the Spirits"

This is Indian Creek Park. It contains play equipment, tennis courts, baseball diamond, skating rink, woodlands, and the creek with the little arching, brown bridge. The sun is always shining here and the grass is green and evenly mowed. I often play with friends and my parents at this park, but my favorite times are when I come here alone. Today I begin my journey by



slowly and quietly entering the woodlands or "forest" as I call it. Branches and leaves brush my legs and face as I make my way through the old trails. Looking at the interaction of the light, leaves, dirt, rocks, flowers, and animals that make-up these sacred burial grounds, I am searching for the "Indian burial mound" that I am sure exists here, unknown and uninterrupted. "No, No, not that one, not that one either, I've dug at both these before." I come to a new bulge of dirt. I stand with my eyes closed, as I try to breathe in the spirits below the earth. A twinge of fear and excitement rushes through me, beginning in my chest and spreading through my limbs. My lips are cold, my stomach quivers. It must be here. I begin to dig into the loose, damp earth. As I dig, I discover interesting earth creatures, pretty rock specimens, seeds, clay, etc. Much to play with and analyze. But no, not today, I have not found the burial mound. However, several of the stones are shaped like arrowheads, and are a soft shale material. With a little grinding and chipping on the edges I could convince myself—and then my friends—that they are true Indian arrowheads. Next, I head for the cement-basin creek to look for crayfish and the legendary baby octopuses that live there. I swear, once I looked into the creek bed and saw hundreds of miniature animals, with bodies the size of peas, and eight



little squiggly legs on them. When I went to look for them the next week they were gone. I don't know if they were a weird form of plant or algae, or some kind-of tad-pole, or what, but I think the memory is real. Once I brought a crayfish home and put it in the water of the deep puddle that forms in our gravel driveway. I thought it would be my pet, but it ran away. This makes me sad, because it can't live without water, and the creek is blocks and blocks away. I feel like I killed it, but I didn't know any better.

#### "Memory Three: The Great Black Panther"

We are scouting the area, crouching, running quickly for the cover of each bush and tree. It is hot and muggy, the sun beats through the minimal shelter of the tree tops in this suburban jungle. The buzzing of the electricity in the telephone cords sounds like the hum of exotic jungle tree insects. In our minds we have our khaki's on, and our tranquilizer guns at our sides. We are hunting the Great Black Panther that has been spotted in our neighborhood. I myself have seen it eye-to-eye several times. Its piercing green eyes and frozen stance confront me briefly each time before it slinks powerfully behind a house or garage. I have convinced my neighbor friends that this is a true and worthy cause, to find this animal. And it is. It is exciting. Every second of it.

#### Buried Treasure"

They will find this. Be it one hundred years from now, or thousands of years from now, someone or something will find this. It is my duty to leave behind specimens of my life as a kid in the 1970's, for others to unearth. I don't remember exactly what I included in this buried personal history: some jewels, newspaper clippings, magazine pictures, writings, playing-cards, etc., but somewhere in my backyard there is a treasure buried. It is double-plastic-bagged, placed in a little wooden box, and double-bagged again. I felt it was my duty to leave a record of what things were like during my lifetime, so that future humans, new earth species, or aliens would know long after I was gone.

#### "Points for Use in Current Work"

As an adolescent I had a lot of trouble and have used many of those experiences to help me understand the adolescents I have worked with in the past. I have never really analyzed my young childhood memories before.

I believe these memories are from when I was between the ages of five and ten. The memories I have described are ones that I cherish as positive, fun, and free. "Memory One, Rock-Powder," helps me see how purposeful, organized, efficient, and creative children can be, even in seemingly simple play. How simple things like color, texture, and taste can be enjoyed as children and over-



looked as adults (although I did end up going to a fine arts college, so I haven't lost it all!). Also, how I used the repetitive motion of grinding as a gateway to meditation, relaxation, and growth. I wonder if I used this an intuitive coping skill to deal with family discord?

"Memory Two, Breathing in the Spirits," reinforces the idea that children can be very creative, and use fantasy both as play themes and growth experiences. I had a deep spiritual connection to the earth and made-up Indian spirits. I was not raised with a religion, and this is how I rationalized my existence and developed my own religion. I think one needs to be careful when working with children who reveal a recognition of spirits, visions, or voices. You need to ask yourself, case by case, if it is just healthy fantasy play, or if it is a culturally and religiously based recognition rather than a sign of mental illness. As far as the baby octopuses—even though I think I saw them—I wonder if some of my memories were embellished and/or made-up. Were they so much fun to believe in and to share with others that they became a reality for me? It reminds me that not everything children say is even close to the truth, even if they think it is. I believe this combines normal cognitive and developmental issues. My tendency to exaggerate was something that I had to confront as a young adult, because it was no longer appropriate, and was seen as lying. Lastly, the fact that I didn't understand the consequences of

taking the crayfish from its home can also be seen as normal cognitive and developmental learning.

"Memory Three, The Great Black Panther," further highlights the fabulous skills of fantasy, adventure, creativity, and purpose that children can have. "Memory 4, Buried Treasure," reminds me to realize how smart and in-touch children can be. I had probably seen a show on archeology or something, and decided that I would bury traces of my culture for future generations. The fact that I understood concepts like life, death, culture, future generations, extinction, future earth species, and aliens astounds me when I think about it now.



I think it is very useful to tap into the fantasy world and creative intelligence of yourself (as a child and as an adult)—and of child clients, in order to do better work with them. For instance, in the video that we saw in class, a boy in therapy talks about getting "new brains" every two years to replace "children's bad brains." This was a very creative and intelligent solution to this child's problems. The therapist skillfully tuned into the underlying messages that accompanied this story in order to pick-up on where the child was coming from, and we were able to infer what some possible causes were for his issues.

## Conclusions

In this final section, teacher and student reflect on the opportunities and limitations this assignment afforded.

John Kayser: Balancing Boundaries and Confidentiality

In the narratives above, students share primarily positive experiences of childhood. Their stories are rich in imagination, playfulness, connectedness, resourcefulness, and resilience. The narrative assignment provided Laura, Michele, and Lynn an opportunity to purposefully reflect and connect childhood to their current work with children and families. As an instructor, I find the narratives wonderful to read and easy to grade because they fulfill the learning expectations I hoped this assignment would promote.

With other narratives describing more troubling and troublesome childhood experiences, students have reported that they found it helpful when I commented on the strengths their stories displayed and honored the lessons they learned, meanings made, and/or gains achieved in later years of development. Much more difficult, however, are those students who write narratives of unrelenting negative experiences about multiple, unresolved, overwhelming traumas from childhood. Despite the parameters, cautions, and safeguards about confidentiality I have tried to build into this assignment (i.e., to only disclose what



students feel comfortable with the instructor knowing), I continue to get a handful of such narratives each year. As this pattern has continued, I have become uncomfortable and uncertain about the narrative assignment.

On the positive side, the narrative assignment is similar to others used in our graduate school that promote self-reflection, consciousness raising, and values clarification. The vast majority of students who have written childhood narratives seem to have enjoyed and benefited from the opportunity. On the negative side, I struggle with maintaining my role as primarily educational, rather than clinical, in responding appropriately to the small number of childhood narratives recounting unresolved traumatic or tragic experiences. I worry that the assignment creates further stress in the lives of already vulnerable individuals and that the power differential between student and teacher in terms of status and control over grades and academic rewards offsets any confidentiality safeguards I try to employ. On the other hand, these narratives are shared for a reason—perhaps as the proverbial "cry for help." As an educator and gatekeeper to the profession, should my role be to request (insist?) that these students get outside help (i.e., counseling or therapy) to deal with these issues so that their work with clients will not be affected? To do so seems intrusive and may blur the roles of teacher, clinical supervisor, or therapist. Not to do so seems

irresponsible, for it puts clients at risk of being harmed by a (potentially) troubled professional.

There is no final answer to this dilemma. I continue to be guided by the principle that it is not the actual lived experience—whether positive or negative—that is of central importance in this assignment. Rather, it is students' work in constructing meaning out of their experiences that is the essential feature of the narrative. If students fail to connect their past experiences to the present, or fail to develop empathy with their child clients, then the assignment has failed to achieve its intended objective.

Presently, I remain committed to incorporating narratives into the course, but am experimenting with different formats that may not require the same depth of personal disclosure. I also am instituting a new safeguard—allowing students to pass on writing a childhood narrative (no questions asked) and to choose, without penalty, an alternative mid-term assignment. While I continue to believe narrative assignments are valuable, readers are invited to respond to this article with comments and suggestions and perhaps narrative accounts of their own experiences. I have also asked Laura, Michele, and Lynn to offer their own final reflections about the opportunities and limitations this type of assignment provided.

Laura Buchanan:  
Final Reflections

In my graduate course work, it has often been said that your "Self" is the tool by which

to help clients. This assignment has allowed me to excavate my childhood self and use her as a translator with my younger clients. The fact that this assignment did not ask that we analyze or apply theory to our recollections seemed to facilitate a more vivid and authentic experience of who I used to be. Besides, aren't all memories embedded in an emotional context? Putting my memories into a narrative helped me to pick up on some of the themes of my childhood, which mostly related to gender roles. My experiences in childhood have turned into values about what constitutes healthy behaviors in individuals and families. By becoming more aware of what my values and assumptions are, I also become more aware of how I may wish to influence my clients. Writing about personal experiences in a narrative form brings back to life memories which may be haunting or blissful. Perhaps it is necessary for all people who wish to work with children to examine their own formative years and become aware of the forces that may guide their interactions with children.

Michele Coates:  
Final Reflections

I wrote my childhood narrative nearly three years ago. Those three short years have wrought great change in my life, my family, and my work. Although the exact nature of my work with children and their families has shifted, I find, upon reflection, my childhood journey still has navigated the same basic approach and fundamen-



tal beliefs written above. This assignment, perhaps more so than any of the multitude of others I encountered in graduate school, provided an opportunity to make a meaningful discovery about myself and the work which I have chosen to do.

The narrative assignment was written in a few short hours, although deciding which account to detail and which one to leave out took more time than I expected.

The benefit of this assignment will last even longer. Three years later, I continue to connect my own experiences, values, and beliefs in childhood magic to the every day interactions I have with children and families. It has enriched my ability to be empathetic, to listen, and to learn from them. There are still hundreds of Star Bars yet to visit and many Co-Co men yet to vanquish.

Lynn Halfmann:  
Final Reflections

Not only was this childhood narrative assignment useful for future work with children, but it was a fun and creative departure from the standard, labor intensive, graduate papers. I remember feeling a sense of writer's block at first, and then I decided that it would be easier if I tried to relive the experiences as if I were still a child and in the moment. In general, I seem to have trouble remembering things from my earlier childhood, unless I see a photograph of the moment. This experience enabled me to remember memories that contained senses of touch, smell, sight, taste, and

emotions that created internal physical responses. It was informative for me to see that my process of developing identity, spirituality, and a need for purpose and creative outlets began very early on. This knowledge will be remembered when working with future child clients. Although I did not choose to write about negative or traumatic childhood memories as other classmates did, I think it would be a useful exploratory and healing tool in such cases. In my opinion it is a therapist's responsibility to work on such personal issues in order to be a more effective, understanding, and true helper. All in all, I am thankful for this opportunity for self-reflection and increased awareness that could benefit children I may work with. □

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