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Agnes Scott College

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“Life writing as leadership”: Teaching life writing in the general education classroom

Abstract:

This article considers the integration of leadership development into a general education curriculum at a liberal arts college, and specifically how foregrounding life writing in such a class allows students to think explicitly about different kinds of leadership approaches. Relying on primary texts as distinct as TED Talks, podcasts, novels, graphic narrative, testimonio, and biofiction, students consider how narrative activism allows for the circulation of testimony. Assignments illuminate many of the larger theoretical concerns of Life Writing Studies – including agency, self-representational strategies, artistic practice, memory, and witnessing – can be useful for reconceptualising leaders and leadership development. With an emphasis on student-directed classroom discussion, critical and careful reading, deliberate textual analysis, team-based learning, and writing for a variety of audiences, the course encourages individual assessments of how life writing can challenge preconceptions and encourage connection. Through such engagement, students learn some of the ways in which a leadership model of “reflect, analyze, act” functions in terms of their own understanding of leadership and their own capacity to lead.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

Leaders and leadership, narrative activism, life writing, pedagogy

Ten years ago, my institution – a majority-minority, historically women’s college in the Southeastern United States – launched a new general education curriculum called SUMMIT. This program’s central three pillars are leadership development, global learning, and digital citizenship. Over the years, two courses have come to anchor the first year in a two-semester sequence: first, one class in leadership development (Leadership Prologue) and, then, one class in global learning (Global Journeys). Journeys is flashy: all first-year students travel in connection with the course – many internationally, to places like Belize, Paris, Milan, and Ghana – and some domestically, to places like New Orleans, New York City, and the Georgia Sea Islands. The leadership course, however, is particularly crucial to student success, as it is our version of a first-year seminar course, both introducing students to college and requiring students to reconceptualise their ideas about leaders and leadership. For years, I was involved in other aspects of the curriculum, specifically in digital literacy, and was, frankly, ambivalent about the neoliberal aims of a leadership curriculum. As an English professor, I am more comfortable considering and deconstructing the ramifications of such aims; I worried that my participation in the teaching of the course might undermine the institutional approach to leadership development.

In part, too, my aversion stemmed from a concern that what I had to offer might not be sufficiently leaderly; I, like many of our students before they take the course, was thinking of leaders exclusively as positional leaders. The first person I think about as a leader is my mother: a retired Army colonel, a Black woman who was part of the early cohort who integrated the American armed services in the late-1970s, a former military police officer and JAG officer and mother of five. As I reflected more deeply, though, I realised that her experiences were exactly the kinds I wanted students to see. I see my mother’s leadership as bridging – and calling into question – the oft-gendered expectations of who leaders are, what they do, and how they look. I considered how her example, both in terms of her conventional leadership positions in the military and in terms of her intellectual approach to those responsibilities, undermines established narratives of who can lead. Her approach centres service: to her soldiers and cadets, to her children, and to her ancestors. Some of the genealogical research she has performed unearthed documents about family members who were enslaved and led to a fuller understanding, in our family, of our history. My own thinking about service – in academic departments, professional contexts, and my communities more largely – stem from her example. I realised that I also see life writing, as a form of testimony and truth-telling, as often composed in the service of justice, working as it does to situate experiential knowledge as a place from which writers and artists show what it has meant to live their lives.

Agnes Scott College’s model of leadership relies on the cycle of reflection, analysis, and action, and when I taught writers like Maxine Hong Kingston or Audre Lorde or Katharine Butler Hathaway in my literature courses, I immediately saw what they were doing through their life writing as leadership. It was testimony. It was narrative activism. It demonstrated, as Mary Robinson puts it, how life writing can “play a crucial role in showing not just the human cost” of human rights abuses, “but also incredible resilience” (qtd. in Jensen & Jolly, 2014, p. ix). I thought deeply about texts that challenge leadership as positional and exclusively the realm of hierarchical structures and proposed a section of the course that posited life writing as

leadership. A quote from the introduction to Leigh Gilmore's *Tainted Witness* (2017) serves as a guiding principle:

When we trace how women's testimony travels within the circulatory systems of institutional and vernacular judgment, as well as literary and everyday accounts, we can recognize how women in the most constrained conditions find inventive ways to bear witness within and across the jurisdictions that define and delimit their humanity. A focus on the individual alone, therefore, misses the complexities of the network in which her testimony seeks a witness and mutes volumes of contextual, resistant knowledge. (pp. 16–17)

Community, networks, and “resistant knowledge”: *Tainted Witness*, and Gilmore's arguments, led me to foreground explicitly the leadership inherent in testimony, the courage associated with bearing witness, how life writing differently engages interlocutors and, in turn, enacts the reflect/analyse/act model that works as the foundation for our model of leadership. Around the time I was conceptualising my section of this course, I attended the 12th Biennial International Auto/Biography Association (IABA) Conference and listened to a presentation from Ana Bélen Martínez García (2022), who spoke about the relationship between life writing and social justice. She, too, emphasised the relationship between speaking out and social justice, emphasising how “Self-performances are curated, repurposed and remediated across a multiplicity of platforms”. Inspired by her presentation and her scholarly work on TED Talks and life writing, I thought beyond conventionally published texts to include testimonies across media and, thereby, consider different audiences central to the work of witnessing.

Once I arrived at this realisation, I grappled with what texts I would include. All sections of this course share one standard course description, which centres “how the liberal arts inform good leadership” (“Syllabus”). All sections, while featuring different themes and disciplinary approaches,

share specific learning goals and introduce the college's approach to leadership development: Within Agnes Scott's mission of educating students to think deeply, live honorably, and engage the social and intellectual challenges of our times, students exercise leadership through processes of **reflecting** on individual strengths, identity, and power; **analyzing** evidence, perspectives, and systems; and **acting** authentically, boldly, and ethically. (“Syllabus”, boldface original)

Courses also share a set of learning outcomes:

1. identify and analyze significant issues, problems, and questions, and evaluate or develop effective responses;
2. summarize and explain the main ideas of a text, speech, doctrine, principle or belief;
3. describe and apply criteria for critically evaluating sources;
4. develop, focus and organize ideas concerning a central topic, and create, revise and present these ideas in written, spoken, visual and digital forms using appropriate sources; and
5. articulate your understanding of leadership or your capacity to lead. (“Syllabus”)

From there, instructors develop additional course descriptions and student learning outcomes; my additional SLOs include: “read, analyze, interpret, and identify literary texts with distinct approaches to life writing, focusing on works by and about individuals across historically marginalized populations to enhance understanding of people from different groups,” “define and apply narrative activism, and compare it to leadership,” and “compile a list of interview questions, hone interview skills, and carry out an effective, compelling conversation in a podcast” (“Syllabus”) [1].

Intentionally open-ended, my course description allows for flexibility in order to attend to students’ engagement, while still centring how, as Meg Jensen and Margaretta Jolly (2014) note, “the life story as a human rights story calls out for emotional recognition and mourning, the compensation of public remembrance and education” so that testimonial writing can “merg[e] with other aesthetic forms to take the audience far beyond the courtroom. Dramatic art, photography, and creative writing, in other words, open up forms of witnessing that create alternative juridical spaces, rendering judgments without issuing punishment” (p. 5). Allowing students to consider these creative works in terms of life writing and its myriad forms underscores how pervasive life writing is in leadership narratives and discourse, while also, to use Jensen and Jolly’s words, “give the lie to simplistic statements about silence and speech” (p. 5).

For first-semester, first year students at an historically women’s institution, students of gender and sexual minority positions, who are racially, economically, and geographically diverse, my hope was to complicate their expectations about what leadership and life writing are. In order to centre their experiences and help them conceptualise leadership development for themselves, we start with some smaller pieces and then move to longer works across platforms and approaches, providing some of the heterogeneity of testimonial possibility. Accordingly, I design assignments to allow students the ability to make selections and decisions about the works they choose to focus on, offering a variety of options from which they can choose, hoping to make assignments worthwhile for students across disciplines and interests. The ultimate goal is to allow students to interrogate how they understand both their own self-construction and the self-construction demonstrated in course texts. Encouraging them to read these texts from such a vantage underscores the need for deep, critical thinking and exposes the potential power reclaiming such narratives as leadership has [2].

I have taught the course several times and always begin with three visual/aural examples of leadership as life writing: Greta Thunberg’s 2018 TED Talk, “The Disarming Case to Act Right Now on Climate Change,” Janet Mock’s “I Am My Sister’s Keeper” speech from the 2017 Women’s March, and Nikky Finney’s acceptance speech at the 2011 National Book Awards. Beginning here gives students a glimpse into how one might understand leadership as non-positional and relational, anchored in ancestry and personal experience, challenging other extant demonstrations of leadership, and exemplifying the reflect/analyse/act model. To underpin my introductions to these works, I rely on theorisations of online autobiographical acts from scholars like Anna Poletti and Kylie Cardell and share ideas from those texts during class [3]. Early in the semester, we read excerpts from Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *Braiding*

Sweetgrass (2013) to root our consideration of leaders/-ship in practices of gratitude and reciprocity. We watch a video of her talking about these issues, allowing students to make connections in terms of transmedia and (self)representation, thinking back to the speeches from Thunberg, Mock, and Finney. An excerpt from Stacy Abrams' memoir *Lead from the Outside: How to Build Your Future and Make Real Change* (2018) is required for all sections; in my section, we focus on Abrams' ideas about and construction of leadership, and how her failure to win the Georgia governorship is tied to her becoming and her self-representational and self-reflective techniques.

I also, though, want students to have exposure to longer texts. Across the years, I have taught Miné Okubo's graphic memoir of Japanese American internment, *Citizen 13660* (1946), Rigoberta Menchú's testimonio *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (1983), Lauren Gunderson's biofictional play *The Revolutionists* (2018), and Ernest Gaines' novel *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971) and subsequent film adaptation (1974). Following its publication, I included sections from *Women, Life, Freedom* (2024), edited by Marjane Satrapi, a collection of graphic storytelling about contemporary Iran, and accompanied it with Golshifteh Farahani's TED Talk: "'Woman, Life, Freedom' in Iran – and what it means for the rest of the world" (2023). In discussing these texts, we consider questions of genre and form, thinking about how these different approaches make use of voice and leadership, and what it means to speak truth. We also spend time in class thinking through what it means to consider fiction in the context of a course like this: how do celebrity biofiction or novels fit into our larger questions? What does a novel, even one based on traditions of narratives of enslavement, tell us about truth? Narrative? Likewise, how does seeing a biographical play contribute to our understanding of testimony and self-representation? How are images or TED Talks life writing? What role do images play? Such questions allow us to consider life writing writ large and how it along with cultural memory, social justice, creativity, and art-making connect to leadership. Crucially, the texts posit a connection between life writing and speech, of particular significance for first-year students in a general education classroom. Rather than encouraging students to "find their voice," I work to show them how important it is to *use* it, in whatever mode makes the most sense for them.

At the fore of the conversation always sit questions of witness and testimony. Okubo's graphic memoir includes images she sketched during internment along with a narrative to contextualise the images, and we emphasise the importance of testimony in visual art since, as Okubo herself explains: "Cameras and photographs were not permitted in the camps, so I recorded everything in sketches, drawings, and paintings" (2014, p. xxvi). Her images depict the realities of both removal and relocation, directly engaging the viewer. Further, Okubo participated in congressional hearings related to internment in 1981, joining scores of evacuees and others in testifying to the US Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians [4]. For our discussion of Okubo's text, which comes early in the course, I build on Gail Okawa's observations regarding strategies for survival and resistance during Japanese/American internment. Okawa suggests that there are five strategies, one of which she describes as "physically creative," which includes visual artistic practices, allowing students to consider the kinds of forms strategies of survival and resistance can take and how these strategies are forms

of leadership [5]. They begin to see their own reading, writing, and artistic practices as acts of leadership as well, which resonates in their reflective work and assignments.

Testimony as motivation is also articulated at the beginning of Gaines' novel, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. The frame narrative features a teacher who wants to record Miss Jane's story to include it in teaching history to students, since stories like hers are not included in textbooks. As was the case with Okubo's memoir, *Miss Jane* centres one experience in the service of collective testimony and witness. "This is not only Miss Jane's autobiography," the teacher/editor observes, "it is theirs as well. ... Miss Jane's story is all of their stories and their stories are Miss Jane's" (1971, p. viii). The doubly autobiographical guise – the unnamed editor's first-person introduction and Miss Jane's narrative itself – encourages us to think about complexities inherent in testimony and historical records through the reflect/analyse/act model of leadership, particularly as it concerns life writing and narratives that have not been recorded in conventional ways. Gaines, in fiction, weaves together the oral narratives of experiences he has heard, reminding readers of the significance of testimony in African American literary history and inaugurating the fictional form of the neo-slave narrative [6]. Students read a critical article by Robert Patterson in which he explicitly considers leadership in the novel, noting that Gaines "examines not only how the untold stories of less-known people and more quotidian acts of enfranchisement contribute to successful civil rights gains, but also how integrating these examples into our conceptual framework alters the paradigms through which we understand these vexed categories of leadership and civil rights" (2013, p. 342). This consideration of non-positional leadership allows students the chance to see how mythification happens in American history and how the fact that certain texts – especially those lauded for their positional leadership roles – elevate certain lives at the expense of others. We also watch the movie adaptation, considering how the film transforms the (unnamed, ungendered, unraced) history teacher into a (white, male) journalist from New York looking to write a profile of Miss Jane. For students, this shift is meaningful and resonates with their own considerations of leadership in art and history.

I begin each session with a piece of visual media, either a TED Talk – about leadership, testimony, storytelling – or a podcast. I rely on StoryCorps' podcast episodes because their brevity allows students a chance to see that crafting a powerful personal narrative can be done in five minutes. Episodes allow us to think about how speakers share their stories and how the emotional experience of listening to individual voices bears witness to their lived realities. Listening as an act of leadership can encourage us to rethink and recontextualise our own experiences and understandings. I select episodes to amplify specific elements of that day's discussion; when we talk about voting rights during the Jim Crow era of segregation, for example, Theresa Burroughs' testimony of voting in Hale County, Alabama, supports our discussion of Gaines' novel, while the Ebihara family's observations about how internment was not something they discussed amplifies the significance of Okubo's memoir. Their testimonies give present-day listeners an opportunity to bear witness and recognise the attendant responsibilities of listening.

Assignments work to reinforce and further questions about the relationship between life writing and leadership. A few assignments are common across the sections; these primarily allow students the ability to reflect on their definitions of leadership at different points in the semester and to consider their own capacity to lead. Such reflection is entirely in line with the focus of my section, as students compose their own reflective autobiographical narratives and rely on their experiences and class discussions to develop definitions. In my course, students think explicitly about the autobiographical “I” they use in such reflections as we work to recognise it as a self-reflective performance and they consider – in our course texts and for themselves – the inherent challenges in writing autobiographically. They examine how the personas within their texts are crafted, rather than imagining the testimonial “I” as simply a conduit for experience or consistent with a unified subjectivity.

In my section, students establish, develop, and maintain a digital portfolio where they can house and showcase their work and draft an “About Me” statement, a self-reflective sketch that allows their audience to learn about who they are. Because portfolios are student-designed, we talk about how aesthetic design, art, music, and images also serve as autobiographical acts. Students work in small groups to lead class discussion about a text once during the semester, which illustrates to them first-hand how reading, analysis, critical thinking, and discussion are leadership practices in and of themselves. In addition, each student serves as note-taker for a running document of class notes; while useful in practice as a comprehensive, collaboratively created digest of our work together, it also requires students to think explicitly about the practice of note-taking as a skill. Together, assignments like these make the idea of writing for an audience real, rather than theoretical.

All sections are required to have a team-based assignment of some kind, as being able to work in a team is something the institution recognises as crucial for leadership development. To that end, in the first iteration of this course, I included a team debate about narrative and form: students were assigned randomly to teams and to three debate topics – first: *what rights do people have to their own stories?* and *what are the ethics of life writing?*; second: *does it matter if the testimony is fact or fiction?* and *how do readers think about graphic narrative, fiction, and testimonio in relation to life writing?*; and third: *are leaders born, or are they made?* Students performed research, sharing what they found with their team members and composing annotated bibliographies. This assignment gave students the opportunity to revisit the overarching questions that had preoccupied us across the semester and they relied on course texts through which to make their arguments. In the course’s second iteration, I assigned a team biographical sketch that asked students to perform biographical and critical research on a figure we had considered in class through the lens of leadership. Students worked in teams of four, were randomly assigned topics, and compiled an annotated bibliography of research done in the service of their presentations. Each team researched a pair of figures covered in class, compared their experiences and leadership styles, and provided biographical sketches via a short film, complete with handout.

When I created this assignment, I was thinking of Philippe Lejeune’s observation that “identity is the real starting point of autobiography, resemblance the impossible horizon of biography”

(1973, p. 24), underscoring that the biographical sketches are, in and of themselves, life writing and acts of leadership. It allows them to investigate and interrogate the lives presented in course texts, regardless of genre, to determine the veracity of authorial (self)representation. Considering fiction and biofiction, in particular, students analyse how the author may have “changed, embellished, augmented, adulterated, or invented for the purpose of the narrative’s plot, aesthetic structure, and teleology” (Kohlke & Gutleben 2020, p. 5) and to what end; the way *The Revolutionists* presents Marie Antoinette, for example, allows students to imagine her voice and actions, but, further, how “the biofictional subject is always an amalgam of archive and imagination, in part drawn from another’s life and in part from the writer’s own,” which means “biofictional representation and remediation always produc[e] a hybrid, composite, historical self-and-Other” (p. 7). In their presentations, then, students determine whether or not these lives are presented in a reasonable or ideal way, if and how they conform or subscribe to students’ expectations of leaders, and in what ways those lives diverge from the historical record.

In researching and disseminating information about these leaders’ lives, the students lead; they teach their classmates and facilitate learning about the lives of the leaders they’ve researched. Students appreciate performing biographical research, interrogating published representations of the leaders they are researching, learning more about who these leaders were as people, and sharing their findings with classmates. Being able to listen to the stories and learn from the experiences of the subjects of their biographies, especially when those leaders come from historically marginalised and invisibilised groups, allows the students to see forerunners in their own lives who have created pathways for student self-expression and determination.

The culminating assignment is a podcast modeled on StoryCorps’ and allows students to identify forebears for themselves and practice the leadership of close listening. Students select someone they want to interview, someone they consider a leader in some fashion, and then develop a list of potential interview questions, write a short biographical sketch of their podcast subject, and upload a podcast with transcript to their digital portfolio. Since the final products are so brief, students select their questions carefully and spend a lot of time editing the podcast itself, making decisions about what parts of the conversation to leave in or to edit out. These acts of curation – from designing interview questions to editing the podcast – are acts of leadership as students share their podcast subject’s ideas about what it means to lead. Students select all kinds of people to interview, ranging from roommates to siblings, parents, and grandparents, to community leaders like teachers, coaches, or religious community members. The autonomy to select a leader – according to their own criteria – and learn about that life, conduct an interview, and share that conversation makes manifest some of the more abstract premises of the course, letting students directly define and biographise a figure important to them. In a reflection essay that accompanies their podcast, students write about what it means to foreground someone else’s definitions of leadership and prioritise someone else’s experiences as they work to make those experiences legible for their classmates. In so doing, the hope is that they continue to undermine facile definitions of leadership and work in the service of uplifting someone else’s narrative.

Narrative activism and narrative agency, narratives of witness and testimony, oral narratives, written narratives, biofictional and written and drawn, translated and mediated: the texts students consider throughout this course – including the text(s) of their own lives – unsettle preconceptions about leaders as they support students’ discovery of how acts of creativity, self-construction, relationality, empathy, and reading are acts of leadership. Life writing is leadership.

Notes

[1] My full course description is: “In this section – *Life Writing as Leadership: Reading Women Leaders’ Lives* – we will consider how personal narratives and stories about lived experiences present models for leadership. Auto/biographical texts galvanize movement after movement, promoting civil and human rights across the world, and take many forms. This semester, we will think about what it is about women’s life stories – life *writing* – that can mobilize and convince. What forms can and do auto/biographical acts take? How can life writing and acts of memory provide counternarratives that promote social justice? What kind of agency does reading about another’s exceptional life confer? What about writing? To answer some of these questions, we will consider narrative activism, auto/biography, and the many different approaches to leadership our writers and subjects take in these narratives. Reading across texts, we pay particular attention to how people construct themselves, their lives, their artistic practices and creative processes, their leadership strategies, and their communities. In so doing, we will see how auto/biographical narratives demand recognition for lives lived and can function as a call to action” (“Syllabus”).

[2] In the United States, PEN America’s data identifies 22,810 cases from 2021–2025 (“The normalization”). Such bans directly invisibilise particular kinds of narratives and testimonies; especially targeted are texts that include LGBTQ+ identities and experiences, consider race and white supremacy, and include depictions of sexual violence (“The normalization”). As PEN America notes: “Stories that reflect the lives, voices and imaginations of young people are being taken from them at the very moment when they are learning to assert their right to access information, their right to speech, and their right to explore the world” (“The normalization”).

[3] Particularly Poletti’s (2021) work in testimony in youth life writing and Cardell’s (2023) on the work of biography in the *Rebel Girls* volumes.

[4] Okubo provided members of the commission with a copy of *Citizen* and gave oral testimony wherein she emphasises how important learning about the interment is, and writes that her testimony was crucial to put on the record, so that, as she puts it: “things can be learned from this tragic episode, for I believe it could happen again” (2014, p. xxix).

[5] Okawa identifies the other four as spiritual, imaginative, intellectual, and physically active.

[6] After watching the film adaptation, we watch some of the DVD extras, including interviews with Gaines in which he explicitly discusses the places and people who inspired *Miss Jane*. Neo-slave narratives are “contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative” (Rushdy, 2023, p. 3). Additional noteworthy neo-slave narratives include Alex Haley’s *Roots* (1976), Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), and Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad* (2016).

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