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Teaching the truth: Navigating student bias in the life narrative classroom

Abstract:

The teaching of life narrative offers powerful and impactful opportunities for students to reconsider much of what they think they know about the world and about themselves. Using my own experience as inspiration, this essay considers student evaluations of teaching in courses on life narrative in which the content challenges their privilege. By examining correlations between *what* narratives we teach, *who* the students we teach them to be, and *who* is doing the teaching, I demonstrate how the metrics of student evaluations are impacted when faculty present students with opportunities to grapple with uncomfortable truths about the lived experiences of others who are systematically oppressed. In examining the truths of who we teach, what we teach and who students perceive us to be when we are when teaching life narrative, this essay shows that flawed mechanisms for feedback allow students to vent biases against faculty who teach life narratives that confronts racism, sexism, imperialism, colonialism, and power dynamics of socio-economic class.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

Teaching, life narrative, student evaluations of teaching, bias

Teaching truth: An introduction

Five years after my promotion to Full Professor – a terminal rank for the professoriate in the United States – I was required to participate in a personnel review of my teaching, scholarship, and leadership at my institution and beyond. These five-year assessments are required of all faculty at every rank as an institutional mechanism to ensure that all professors deliver on the promise of excellence upon which they are hired, tenured, and promoted. Decisions about internal resources and opportunities depend on the outcome of these assessments, so they are taken very seriously by administrators and professors alike. My administrator's appraisal noted that I had exceeded my institution's standard of excellence by three to five times in the categories of leadership and scholarship. It was my student evaluations, however, that caused administrators to be concerned about my performance in the category they deemed most important for a small liberal arts college – teaching.

This concern is not unfounded. Since having expanded my range of teaching after promotion to include more courses in Life Narrative studies, my student teaching evaluation scores had been consistently lower than before promotion and no longer met my institution's standards for going *above and beyond* expectations at my rank. As soon as I gained seniority to develop new courses, my scores dropped from the top range of five (considered to be excellent) to the high threes and the low fours (closer to average). Scores were particularly low in my courses on life narrative by women of Latin America. The unstated correlation is that my student scores lowered after promotion and I could address this, presumably by working as hard at teaching as I had before the security of tenure and seniority. I was reminded that owing to the cover of anonymity, student feedback was considered objective and superseded all other measures, including how regularly I supervised independent undergraduate and graduate research or the number and competitive profile of internships I directed. Excellence in leadership and scholarship did not matter if students did not like taking my classes.

The fact that I achieved such high ratings in the other categories likely raised suspicion that I was becoming less engaged as an instructor, which could not have been further from the truth. I was fully aligned with my departmental standards for assigning reading, writing and assessments. I was innovative in my teaching, including being one of the first at my institution to offer online courses two full years before the Covid-19 pandemic made it common practice. I integrated my teaching and my journal editorship instituting a lab for the study of academic publishing. I even wrote a monograph based on the content of my yearly seminars on life narrative and human rights violations in Latin America. The overriding concern rested with comments by students who reported that my courses were so challenging that they often left class with a headache.

My work begins here as a self-reflexive examination of the truths I confront as a professor who uses life narrative to teach students literary and critical content that challenges privilege. Research informs my reflections on how bias in student evaluations leads feedback and scoring down a very personal and highly suspect path toward truths about *who* we teach, *what* we teach, and *who students perceive us to be* when we are teaching life narrative. I focus how student

evaluations of my teaching became more critical just as my promotion granted greater freedom to teach in my area of specialty – life narratives of dictatorship, exile, and immigration.

Truth and *who* you teach

As a scholar of women's and InterAmerican Multiethnic literatures, I teach reading-, writing- and speaking-intensive courses in four content area designations that my institution's core curriculum requires. In addition to a humanities requirement, my courses fall into the highly contentious designation of diversity categories of race/ethnicity, global, and gender/sexuality studies. Therefore, my syllabi foreground the cultural, social, and political histories of literature that are germane to these categories. However, as many as two-thirds of the enrolled students are often not English majors and are not practiced in the discourse of literary studies. They take the course to satisfy multiple diversity requirements. My syllabi foreground texts that confront tyranny and gender-based violence in the Americas. Often student feedback expresses disappointment because reading literature should be "fun". Such comments alerted me not only to the reality that this content is upsetting to students, but that and their expectations to enjoy autobiographical literature outweigh the value of narratives that engage them as critical witnesses to uncomfortable realities lived experience.

On the first day, students sometimes share during introductions that this will be their first time reading Latina life narratives. I often begin with the pre-colonial Areíto of the Caribbean, a now nearly extinct ritual performance of music, dance and storytelling in which the Taíno people preserved and passed down their ancestral histories. Then we read Afro-Latino narratives, specifically Afro-Antillean *autopoetas* who retrace their ancestry through the Middle Passage. I include life narrative from Haiti, which is not considered part of the Hispanic Caribbean and, therefore, not widely considered as belonging to its cultural and aesthetic traditions despite sharing Latin American legacies of colonialism via Spain. Oral histories, autoethnographies, and cultural ethnographies of the 20th and 21st centuries are part of my specialisation in Life Narrative studies. From the Jewish Cuban autoethnographies of Ruth Behar to the textile testimony of women in 20th century Chile who documented the murder and disappearance of their loved ones in their burlap sack tapestries called *arpilleras*. I introduce them to internet forms of life narrative in Latin America, including the password-protected blogs of daily life in communist Cuba that routinely shut down and re-emerge under different names to avoid censorship and possible imprisonment. This exposure facilitates their learning about different literacies and different modalities in the transmission of life stories. Feedback on these subjects is sometimes dismissive, critiquing the study of life narratives as "not literary".

By requiring examination, discussion, and further research about lived experiences that are complex and unresolved, I have frustrated students' expectations of happy endings, of redemptive narratives and subjects who are always brave and whole in the end. However, this is not necessarily by design. In my courses, we confront the experiences of subjects terrorised and fractured by conquest, enslavement, and other forms of state-sponsored trauma.

Truth and *what* you teach

Contemporary narrative of immigrant, refugee, and native-born Latinx peoples in the US raise sensitive and divisive issues related to the current US national security agencies that police the documentation of lives and experiences. Lessons on these narratives risk becoming reports to the US Department of Education, a far greater consequence than negative student teaching evaluations. Contention about diversity requirements has only grown more combative in the United States since 2017. These designations were recently ordered to be removed from the curriculum along with any other program, office, or initiative under the umbrella terms diversity, equity, and inclusion following the January 2025 inauguration of our current president [1]. K–12 schools, colleges, and universities receiving federal funding were given two weeks to end any effort in the admission, retention, administration, and teaching of students through Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives or risk losing their federal budgets. The stakes for people of colour teaching life narratives by and about people of colour were raised when the US federal government launched an “End DEI” portal on its Department of Education website under the URL “EndDEI.ED.GOV” on February 27th, 2025. There, users were met with the following message prompting users to believe that children have a right to an education free of DEI:

The U.S. Department of Education is committed to ensuring all students have access to meaningful learning free of divisive ideologies and indoctrination. This submission form is an outlet for students, parents, teachers, and the broader community to report illegal discriminatory practices at institutions of learning. The Department of Education will utilize community submissions to identify potential areas for investigation.

The portal includes an anonymous customer service-style complaint form users are encouraged to complete if they believe that their “rights have been violated as a result of a diversity, equity, and inclusion policy, program, or practice in a publicly funded K–12 school, college, or university”. Space for up to 450 words detailing incidents so that the government could “conduct an investigation” [2]. This added measure amounts to an open call to target faculty who teach content combatting racism and sexism.

U.S. Department of Education

Schools Should be Focused on Learning

The U.S. Department of Education is committed to ensuring all students have access to meaningful learning free of divisive ideologies and indoctrination. This submission form is an outlet for students, parents, teachers, and the broader community to report illegal discriminatory practices at institutions of learning. The Department of Education will utilize community submissions to identify potential areas for investigation.

Your email:

School or school district:

ZIP Code:

Please describe in as much detail as possible the discriminatory practice taking place:

Upload File (optional):

Figure 1: Screenshot of U.S. Department of Education “EndDEI.ED.GOV” portal [3].

Civic leaders are targeting faculty for *who they are* and *what they teach* and student evaluations are mirroring this satisfaction survey model in which the anonymity, meant to encourage and protect students’ honesty, enables an unchecked privilege to reject teaching and learning about non-mainstream storytelling about life. In this context, students, like anyone else hailed by the US Department of Education, are abetted for making ad hominem attacks on faculty, especially if they are made online rather than in person, because it is easy and because it is anonymous (Wildermuth & Davis, 2012). In the spirit of Tiffany Justice, Co-Founder of Moms for Liberty, some are all-too-ready to “share the receipts of the betrayal” in a US education system “pushing critical theory, rogue sex education and divisive ideologies” (U.S. Department of Education, February 27, 2025). In the months following the inauguration, I had a student request permission to leave the room during discussions of narratives containing what they considered to be indoctrinating. I also received a request to take on the management of a student’s emotional response by providing page- and passage-level notations related to gender fluidity as “trigger warnings” to protect them from having to participate in graded activities related to topics that went against their religious beliefs.

Truth and *who* teaches

When difficult, traumatic content or identity is part of the curriculum, teaching effectiveness is not the issue and research proves it (Boring et al., 2016; Hornstein, 2017; Kreitzer & Sweet-Cushman, 2022; Mowatt, 2019; Wolfe, 2022). So too, the flawed nature of both qualitative and quantitative feedback on teaching is well documented, especially for women and people of colour, and for faculty who teach studies in colonialism, critical race theory, and gender and sexuality (Aragón et al., 2023; DeWall, 2023; Kim et al., 2024). Bias towards faculty who hold space in the curriculum to challenge racist, sexist, homophobic, and xenophobic biases, (among others) is not new. Even in times when previous US presidential administrations poured funding into educational programs that promote equity and justice, institutions of higher education in the US have continued to use student teaching evaluations proven to be biased against the women and faculty of colour who disproportionately teach anti-racist and anti-sexist content. Evaluations have always failed to measure teaching effectiveness, but they disproportionality impact people of colour in a profession where they represent less than 13 percent of full-time faculty (Wolfe, 2022). In randomised studies of US and French students, student ratings of male instructors were statistically higher in all categories (Boring et al., 2016). To be a woman of colour teaching the life narrative of women of colour is to be triply disadvantaged by student teaching evaluations.

Published correlations between student evaluation of teaching and faculty who teach challenging content prove that the “cover of anonymity” enables biased comments. Those faculty who are among an abysmally low percentage at the terminal rank in the US and, therefore, very unfamiliar as intellectual authorities in the collegiate classroom are already at a disadvantage. They are subject to what R. A. Mowatt describes as “a form of racialized intellectual violence” when personnel decisions about tenure, promotion, salary, and other resources are based, in part, on scores and comments based on cultural bias rather than instructor performance (2019, p. 111). The use of flawed student evaluation scoring over other evidence of excellence can also prevent faculty of colour from advancing in their careers. In my case, student evaluations were treated as evidence that I had become a less effective teacher after my promotion, rather than a consideration of prejudice against the subject matter I taught. When student teaching evaluations are used as satisfaction surveys to rate faculty performance, the student is the customer. Therefore, the student is always right and entitled to complain: “The business metaphor framing students as customers who are always right creates a learning space where students may feel entitled to engage in student resistance, incivility, and disruption” (LeFebvre et al., 2020, p. 23). In this model, faculty who challenge students are increasingly penalised by complaints via student teaching evaluations. In fact, the likeability of a course can be inversely proportional to how much students learn and how hard they work to achieve successful grades. Good teachers require students to exert effort, something that students do not necessarily enjoy (Hornstein, 2017, p. 5). Meanwhile, faculty are left not only to process unreliable evaluations but to explain them to administrators, as low rates of response to student evaluations are also perceived to be a failure of the instructor (Carmack & LeFebvre, 2019, p. 351).

Teaching and teaching life narrative

Given this, it is clear that faculty also face disadvantages when teaching particular topics or areas: life narrative is a form that requires students to grapple with the powerful, but likely unfamiliar impact of reading and responding to diaries, memoirs, and testimony by everyday people, some of whom are systematically excluded from (or marginalised within) centres of privilege in educational institutions. To teach the life narratives of minoritised populations amplifies the stories and storytelling traditions of those people about whom they are least likely to learn.

Life narrative pedagogy is an ideal practice for prompting questions of how students engage with the voices and life experiences of others. Students exposed to their first and sometimes only experience with life narrative as a serious subject of artistic and academic study in college are positioned to reconsider what they think they know about the world and about themselves. How the students meet this challenge is at the heart of my inquiries about teaching truth. Life narrative pedagogy positions lived experience as truth. As Orly Lael Netzer writes in her contribution to this issue, titled “Lives of the Nation: On Teaching Life Writing in the Canadian Studies Classroom”, teaching a life narrative is “not to ... position lived experience as ‘alternative’ to the official stories, but rather, to position life stories as knowledge in their own right” (2026, p. 3). Lael Netzer reminds us that teaching life narrative should not be about polarising “gotcha moments” in which students feel that they must take sides and prepare to defend or attack a position. Yet, this is the current political climate in which my students live, their approach to education – especially as they enter the age of voting eligibility – is shaped by polarising messages from the current federal government about civic duty to inform on practitioners of inclusive teaching.

In “Teaching, Trauma, Writing: The Truth’s Superb Surprise”, Tanis MacDonald notes many “writers are not concerned with writing a book that everyone can comfortably access; they may be equally unconcerned with writing to educate their historical oppressors” (2022, p. 441). When unpacking complex and challenging narratives, students may encounter unknowable human experiences in ways that make them feel powerless to understand, even guilty for what they do not know. But discomfort is expected and yields what MacDonald refers to as “undiscovered access to ‘the truth’s superb surprise’” (p. 440). The goal is not to cause students harm or shame, but to prompt them to unlearn an impulse to command the material, while simultaneously assessing its impact on their thinking. Gina Snooks writes, “The purpose of teaching difficult or traumatic subject matter is to help students learn how power and privilege operate in specific cultural, social, political, and historical contexts; and to understand its ongoing effects” (2022, p. 445). Teaching students to approach life narratives ethically, to avoid the commodification of trauma and to take responsibility to engage with the subject’s experience, must include challenging them to approach narratives openly and intersubjectively. They must learn to read life narrative without “figuring it out” – to *not understand*, to *not know*, and to *not find solutions*. In, “On Teaching Life Writing for (Not) Knowing”, Vicki Hallett underscores the importance of students experiencing vulnerability with what they do not find familiar and easy (or fun) to understand. Hallett says:

In asking students to sit with what they do not understand, I am not asking them to ‘figure it out,’ as if people were mathematical equations to be reconciled through the proper calculus. I am asking that they simply sit with life stories, and allow them to be in their minds, to exist in a space of non-understanding, and for that to be enough. (2022, p. 480)

Not knowing is a state of vulnerability contrary to the corporate model of education in which tuition is an investment in success, and “getting the answer right means getting a good grade and then getting a good degree, and finally a good job, thus becoming ‘successful’” (Hallett 2022, p. 482). Not knowing the subject of life narrative, an already unstable category, demonstrates an “incomplete knowledge” exposing “legitimate, and ethical intellectual places from which to engage with others, and to interrogate the logics of hegemonic power structures” but often not enough to satisfy students seeking an enjoyable experience (p. 481).

The truth and what the teacher learned

In 1996, Professor of English Jane Tompkins published a professional memoir about her experiences in the classroom. In chapter ten of *What the Teacher Learned: A Life in School*, she reflects on an incident that gives the chapter its title, “The Day I Walked Out of Class”. While negotiating a particularly challenging semester at Duke University, she shared a will to teach in ways that “make them [students] take responsibility for learning on themselves” (p. 132). This, she learned, is the kind of pedagogy that requires students to learn about themselves as much as about the subject matter. However, she cautioned that the lessons would be fraught with inner turmoil for students because “once the door to self-determination was open, chaos entered” (p. 132). Having read *What the Teacher Learned* as soon as it was published, I was eager to learn from a life narrative on the opposite end of academia from where I stood. As a new PhD student with a teaching assistantship, I turned to Tompkins seeking lessons that I could apply to my own fledgling role as the teacher. My copy is still on the shelf not far from my reach and the many passages I highlighted over my early years as a student-turned-professor remain at the heart of my teaching. Some of my most successful practices were inspired by that memoir and a few are scribbled in the margins: Give grace and teach students to give themselves grace; take risks and encourage students to take risks too; model for students the power of using your voice and encourage them to consider the use of their voices to be a non-negotiable requirement of learning. Tompkins’ lessons have served me well for what are now over 30 years as an instructor in the collegiate classroom.

At this moment in the political history of the US, a lesson with which I continue to struggle is the need to maintain safe spaces in the classroom. Faculty efforts to create a space for open inquiry and expression are in direct competition with a call to punish professors whose content challenges students’ ways of knowing and understanding how others experience the world. In early 2025, at the start of a new political administration, I found myself forced to not use any of the more than 250 words banned by our head of state. Self-censoring was my first response to this restriction, but it could not be my only response. How could I not continue to create safe spaces for students to do the work of self-reflexive and self-determining learning that Tompkins

advised would be worth the chaos? Certainly, this could be done in a course on life narrative in which one of our jobs is to bear witness to authors who were also creating safe spaces. So, I developed an assignment that would invite students to be narrators of their own work and share their reading in approaches to which, according to their feedback, they struggled to relate. In this way, students would alternate in joining me to construct safe spaces in which they would learn from one another.

In 10-minute presentations with 5–7 supplemental slides, students shared their perspectives with the class. Randomly assigned by the instructional software to one of our book-length texts, students would take responsibility for showing what they learned in a format of their choice:

(Inter)Disciplinary Hot Take. Read your assigned text through the theoretical and methodological lenses and/or critical and practical frameworks of your major. Focus on 3–5 literary devices, such as the themes, structure, form, juxtaposition, prose, symbolism, imagery, tone, point of view, figurative language, etc. Identify moments of not only poetic justice in the text, but also one or more of the following at the heart of your reading: ethical, social, emotional, or legal justice.

How Would You Teach It? Imagine that *you* are the instructor and create a college lesson for a single class in which you teach your assigned text. Highlight one goal for your students' learning and a detailed plan for how you will teach the 3–5 literary devices, such as the themes, structure, form, juxtaposition, prose, symbolism, imagery, tone, point of view, figurative language, etc., to achieve that goal. Include in the overview of your lesson at least one activity, set of discussion questions, written/oral assignment, suggested reading, or project idea that advances not only poetic justice in the text, but also one or more of the following at the heart of your goal: ethical, social, emotional, or legal justice.

The assignment placed responsibility for reading in the hands of students by requiring them to choose their approach and maintain focus on both the tenets of literary study as well as those of engaging justly with human experience. Students expressed confidence in their choices and their responses to one another's presentations were enthusiastic and positive, noting that they learned things they did not anticipate and appreciated different perspectives. I enjoyed observing these presentations and student peer feedback, as they sometimes offered the same observations I made. Having an opportunity to consider, prepare, and deliver their perspectives in class allowed them to field questions and feedback from a diverse group of learners. Student evaluations of my teaching were also more positive following this change. I no longer see *as much* criticism of the reading list or concern over the topics that those readings require them to confront. I see more comments on how students learned from one another. In early 2026, I find myself piloting more changes to my syllabi with assignments that prompt students to take ownership of their learning. The learning process is ongoing, and I am still experimenting with new ideas inspired by some of the authors in this issue.

Truth and pushback: A conclusion

While writing this essay, a former colleague comes to mind. She once drafted a Swiftian editorial for our campus newspaper proposing a virtual ratings website on which faculty would anonymously enter comments and rate their students. As with our personnel files, it would be part of a compulsory performance rating system accessible by password protected permission to student employers, and not much different from the student feedback and ratings to faculty. Proposed to help improve performance in the classroom, such a system could never be more than satire for many reasons, not the least of which is the assumption that professors already hold all the power.

Feedback is a challenging mechanism. Some comments on my teaching evaluations seem harmless, such as the microaggressively gendered “nice shoes”. However, they diminish authority of the instructor as a professional and as a human being rated on appearance. Similarly, dismissive comments that literature is supposed to be fun or that life narrative is not sufficiently “literary” reveal the presence of cultural scripts and ideologies that code both the instructor and course content as trivial. While an editorial like the one imagined by this frustrated former colleague is improbable, it is provocative. I much prefer pushing back from within the realm of professional exchange and contributing to a volume on teaching alongside a group of brilliant colleagues sharing their best practices for teaching life narrative under sometimes challenging circumstances.

Notes

[1] U.S. Department of Education, January 23, 2025.

[2] When searching for this form to further cite its language in July 2025, I was met with a warning of a “potential security threat” and cautionary messages about certificates that originated outside of the GOV government domain. The website was removed following pressure from a court case filed in the state of New Hampshire by the National Education Association against the US Department of Education. Documentation about the date of removal varies, but Internet archive software shows that it was last used on May 13th, 2025 (Powell Crain, 2025; National Education Association et al.).

[3] U.S. Department of Education, February 27, 2025.

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