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Leila M. Pazargadi

Retracing memory: Using multimodal scaffolding to create autographics in the classroom

Abstract:

This article examines how undergraduate composition students at Nevada State University used a multimodal scaffolded workshop to compose autobiographical comics alongside their study of two autographics: Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*. The workshop pairs two pedagogical strategies: the narrative approach, drawn from collaborative work on summer bridge programmes (Tavecchio & Pazargadi, 2020), which asks students to exchange life stories as a route to mutual transformation; and a multimodal scaffolded approach, drawing on Robin Jocius's CLICK model, which sequences three modes of composition (mind map, written reflection, six-panel comic) in incremental stages. Drawing on Comics Studies (Groensteen, 2007; McCloud, 1994; Polak, 2017), the article argues that comics is specifically suited to memory work because it requires viewers to assemble meaning in-between the gutters, and to enter the affective and ethical exchange of testimony. Read alongside Gillian Whitlock's account of the testimonial transaction (Whitlock, 2015), students' six-panel autobiographical comics emerge as both pedagogical artefacts and exercises in life narrative, in which the work of representing trauma and ordinary memory is at once aesthetic and relational, resulting for the student in a moment of deeper self-realisation.

Biographical note:

Leila Moayeri Pazargadi is Professor of English at Nevada State University, where she teaches composition, postcolonial literature, Life Narrative, ethnic American literature, and Middle Eastern literature. Her research focuses on Middle Eastern women writers producing autobiographical material in fiction and non-fiction after 9/11, also extending to comics and Persian photography of the Qajar era. She co-founded Nevada State's Nepantla Summer Bridge Program (2013) and received Nevada State University's *iTeach Heritage Award* (2014) and Occidental College's Erica J. Murray Young Alumni of the Year award. She holds a PhD in Comparative Literature with certification in Gender Studies from UCLA (2012).

Keywords:

Narrative approach, comics, Life Narrative studies, multimodal scaffolding

Introduction

When considering the function of memory as it relates to autobiographical storytelling, one must consider the *process* of remembering as much as the finished *product*. As a professor of English specialising in Life Narrative studies, I've been pondering two questions regarding the production of autobiographical writing, especially in the classroom: 1) what does the process of remembering emotionally rely on, and 2) how do we write about or visually depict a specific memory? To address these two questions, I created a two-part autobiographical workshop for my undergraduate English Composition students. My hope was to see how emotionally charged information could be expressed between students and their peers within a classroom setting. Through a multimodal [1] scaffolded approach, students first reflected on a turning point in their lives in a mind map, and after generating written reflections about that specific moment, turned this into a six-frame comic strip that they shared with the class through a discussion post. The process of autobiographical exchange between students became further layered since they were creating their own short, autobiographical narratives in response to autographics [2] we read in class, namely, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (2003) and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2007). Both texts have been lauded for their use of the comics form to communicate an array of complex themes such as coming of age, death, depression, war, and trauma.

Following Spiegelman's and Satrapi's examples, I designed a workshop in which students composed their own autographics: six-frame versions drawn from moments in their lives. But, before describing the workshop itself, I want to clarify the two pedagogical strategies that organise it: the "narrative approach" and the "multimodal scaffolded approach". Firstly, the narrative approach is the relational dynamic of the assignment. Drawn from my earlier collaborative work on summer bridge programmes (Tavecchio & Pazargadi, 2020), it asks students to exchange life stories as a way of "raising awareness about identity capital, encouraging identification with others, and inspiring mutual transformation" (p. 216). A life story, in this frame, is temporally situated in the contexts of past, present, and future, and the exchange itself (which engages in speaking, listening and witnessing) is the pedagogical event. Secondly, the multimodal scaffolded approach is the structural apparatus that makes the narrative approach possible in an asynchronous classroom. Drawing on Robin Jocius's CLICK model wherein collaboration, loops, incremental composing, critique, and knowledge of multimodal composing processes take place (2020, p. 146), my workshop sequences three modes of composition in deliberate, sequential order: the mind map, written reflection, and a six-panel autographic. Paired together, the strategies work in tandem as the scaffolding allows for thoughtful building, while the narrative approach offers autobiographical expression and empathetic viewership.

Thus, in this article, I explore the way in which students at Nevada State University used multimodal scaffolding to create their own autographics after reading and analysing graphic memoirs. Often, my students were reading and interrogating *Maus* and *Persepolis* for the first time, so they were particularly struck by the complex comics aesthetics (panel composition, gutter use, and visual style, to name a few) and layered life storytelling. In order to better understand and appreciate the way in which Spiegelman and Satrapi balance the ethical and

historical considerations of their narratives with the technical aspects of their comics renderings, I created an assignment where students were tasked with 1) reflecting on a turning point from their past, 2) creating a six-frame comic strip based on that reflection, and 3) commenting on one another's autobiographical comics. Incorporating a simplified version of the narrative approach in this assignment allowed students to investigate their own memories and core values, while exchanging these experiences with others in the class. During the narrative approach process, students often learned as much about themselves by reading and receiving the story of others, particularly those they perceived as Other.

Additionally, by using a scaffolded framework, I asked students to create autobiographical content step-by-step through a pre-recorded workshop via our Canvas learning management system. This scaffolded, multimodal approach allowed students to take in the autographics they read, and to reflect on questions that could also relate to their own past. In so doing, they activated their autobiographical memory and all that it inhabits to complete the assignment. Moreover, through this scaffolded approach, students had more points of intervention than a single-page assignment allows to reflect on, construct, and revise their projects. Finally, through the multimodal framework of the project, students were able to express themselves in several ways, which not only engaged creativity around self-expression, but it also fulfilled the linguistic targets of our composition courses by helping students to formulate and revise their autobiographical narratives in English [3].

The narrative approach workshop: Accessing memory and producing life writing

Within the biographic method, which can also be referred to as the narrative approach, the awakening of a memory is triggered by tuning into a significant moment, perceiving this moment precisely, and subsequently describing this moment visually. This process can lead to new insight whereby themes can become more apparent, and experiences can undergo a new meaning. Through the exchange of autobiographical stories, students are not only able to reflect on their own stories and ensuing forms of capital (identity, aspirational, familial, and navigational), but also able to become more empathic listeners of the stories of others. As Gillian Whitlock (2007) notes in *Soft Weapons*, acts of autobiographical disclosure can elicit “empathetic witnessing,” which has the capacity to render listeners more receptive to receiving and processing life stories (p. 77). In my experience teaching students and directing a summer bridge programme, students can develop a deeper understanding about their own experiences when they engage in the process of listening to the stories of others (Tavecchio & Pazargadi, 2020, p. 230).

It is for this reason that in Part I of my Autobiographical Workshop, I asked students to begin this process by creating a mind map about a “meaningful moment” from their life story that marked a turning point. This should be a moment when they had to make an important decision and leave another option behind. During the process, I reminded students to choose an example that they would also be willing to share with their classmates. After selecting their turning point, students had to compress their specific moment into one word or phrase to be written in the centre of their mind map. To populate their map, they were to write everything down that

occurred to them concerning the situation. They had to think about the people involved, location, life stage, and situational notes like emotional state, thoughts, and outcomes. In short, students were to be as explicit as possible. Case in point, the excerpted, anonymous example [4] depicts a student's meditation on a move from the Philippines to America (see Figure 1; "Mind map from anonymous student", 2025). One can see all the various components that made up the moment: "leaving family and friends," "fear of the unknown," "not fluent and confident in speaking English," and "meeting stepdad for the first time," to name a few key components. During this step, students learned to access their memories, choose a specific memory, and segment it into smaller moments, feelings, sensations, and recollections.

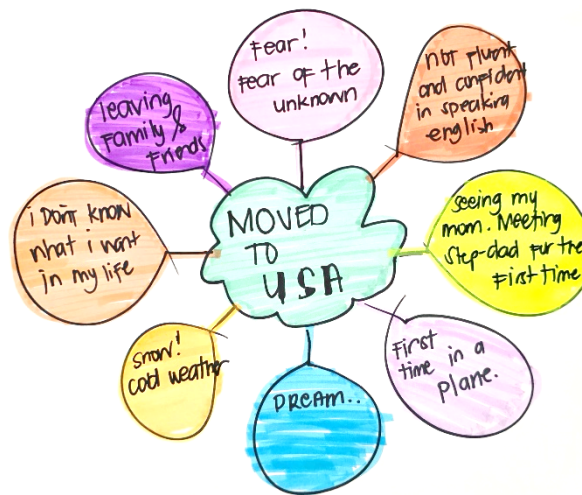


Figure 1: Student sample of a mind map.

Mind maps can be especially beneficial for improving retention and recall, boosting memory, supporting metacognition, and assisting with comprehension. As Emmelien Merchie and Hilde Van Keer note in "Mind Mapping as a Meta-learning Strategy: Stimulating Pre-adolescents' Text-learning Strategies and Performance?" mind maps can be described as having the following characteristics: "(1) they contain words or word groups, (b) the spatial arrangement between these elements indicate text relations, and (c) they represent the conceptual organisation of a text" (Merchie & Van Keer, 2016, p. 129). In their study on use of mind maps by adolescents, Merchie and Van Keer found that they can improve recall and serve as metacognitive text-learning strategy. When considering the work of memory at the heart of autobiographical storytelling, mind maps can be effective in helping with the distillation of information through relational organisation of concepts. According to John C. Nesbit and Olusola O. Adesope in "Learning with Concept and Knowledge Maps: A Meta-Analysis," there is a dual coding of image and text that takes place during the construction of mind maps. Because they rely on distilled words and images to relay context, processing them is a lot faster than for the verbal or textual coding found in prose. This leads to a lower cognitive load required to identify new associations, which can allow for a more efficient understanding of long-term memory (Nesbit & Adesope, 2006, p. 418). As a learning tool, the mind map was a helpful starting point for my students to spatially identify and map out their memories before proceeding to the second half of our autobiographical workshop.

After successfully creating their mind maps, students were instructed to describe fully what they experienced in terms of their feelings, sights, sounds, smells, and situation in a 150-word reflection. When writing their autobiographical vignettes, I recommended that they start with the following opening sentence: “Looking back to the moment I remember ... or I see myself doing” as if they were watching a film about the past. I also offered them the following guidelines:

- *Describe the situation as precisely as possible, and in the present time with the present tense.*
- *Using the first person, write in simple present.*
- *Do not give any explanations, thoughts or judgments, try to stick to the facts and feelings of that specific moment.*
- *Try to involve your senses: “How did you feel? What did you smell? What did you hear?”*
- *When finished, give your story a title.*

Lastly, after completing this second part of the first workshop, students submitted their work to me, since this portion was not to be shared with other students. They were graded on a complete/incomplete scale, since to grade them on a points value scale, I feared, would invalidate their experiences and work. Through this exercise, students were able to reflect on this important turning point from their past, which might have altered the trajectory of their lives. For the student who created the mind map above, they chose to focus on their emotions and the sensory world around them when they arrived at an American airport terminal. Like this student, many other students often wrote about huge moves, the death of a loved one, graduation from high school and entrance to college, becoming a parent, or even traumatic topics like abuse. As the practitioner of this type of workshop, it was important for me to remind students that I was there to witness, support, and guide them through the workshop’s process and product. Also, I wanted them to know that I was not judging their chosen moment, and that they should only disclose what they were comfortable sharing with their classmates. During this first part of the workshop, students began to understand some of the aims of the narrative approach: accessing memory and developing autobiographical disclosure.

Part II of our Autobiographical Workshop took place a week after the first, and it asked students to take what they wrote in their reflections for Part I and turn that into a six-panel comic strip that visually depicted the “turning point” moment from their lives. Either using hand-drawn comics or platforms like Pixton.com, students created their own six-frame comic strip, which they posted to the class’s discussion post thread. Since the course was asynchronously taught, I delivered both workshops via pre-recorded video, alongside my own comic strip that communicated the directions. Because we were an asynchronous class, the discussion post component was crucial to ensuring that students engaged with one another’s comics. For the discussion, students posted their autographic alongside a brief reflection that addressed the following questions: *Why did I choose that particular moment from my life? What was the process of accessing my memory like? What did I have to change, omit, or augment to visually depict a small fragment from my life story? What did I struggle with during the process of*

remembering, drafting, writing, and drawing? After posting their initial post, students also had to respond to two classmates' posts. They could comment on details of their classmate's strip and/or their reflection about the process of creation. As a result, students were notably introspective about their memories, and supportive of their peers. When discussing why they chose a particular moment, a few students had the following to say: "This is the moment when my life completely changed," "I chose this moment because I think if this never happened I would be still hiding my true-self to this day and I would act differently, and try to fit in my family's expectations," and "It represents a turning point in my identity and independence" (excerpts taken from my English Composition 102 course). As mentioned before, explanations centred on major turning points, such as becoming a parent, going to school, adopting a pet, enrolling in the military, the death of a loved one, making a huge move, or surviving abuse and/or addiction.

Just as the written reflections were illuminating to read through, the students' comics creations were fascinating to view. Most used the Pixton platform that I provided, but occasionally, there were stunning hand-drawn comics by our Visual Media majors, suggesting deeper personal expression and vulnerability. Hand-drawn comics, as Viljoen (2026, p. 24) argues, foreground embodiment in particular ways that templated platforms cannot, since "drawing cannot be separated from the hand of a specific enunciator" (Groensteen, 2010, p. 4, qtd in Viljoen, 2026, p. 25). In either format, students were allotted only six frames for their autographics, and so had to make many narratological choices, such as: which excerpts of their life story to focus on, which narrator perspective to use, which moments to begin and conclude with, which panel transitions to deploy (McCloud, 1994), which type of aesthetics to adopt, and which dialogical content to include. For a composition class that focused on exploring the power of one's voice in literary texts, it was thrilling to watch students become authors and grapple with these types of narratological decisions.

One such comic begins with the seemingly quotidian image of a plane ride for a family reunion (see Figure 2, "Comic strip from anonymous student", 2025). As the comics panel progresses, the student narrates her newfound closeness with her Aunt Sharon. The tone of the first five frames is one of exuberance as the student meets up with her family in Florida. In the sixth and final frame we see that the student is visiting her Aunt Sharon, but this time, the avatar of Aunt Sharon is replaced by a coffin at a cemetery. The exuberant tone persists, and if this were written as prose, more explicit commentary would be needed to describe the significant demise of Aunt Sharon in this student's life. But in comics, one can include a striking juxtaposition between image and text, suggesting that the memory and spirit of Aunt Sharon live on for the student. We *see* what has become of Aunt Sharon and we witness the student's continued devotion to her as she sits by her coffin at the cemetery. This is exactly what Groensteen (2007) identifies as the work of braiding: meaning does not arrive through a single panel but accumulates across the sequence, as image and text play with and against one another. The misalignment in this student's final panel (exuberant tone juxtaposed with coffin imagery) creates a quiet, accumulative grief that prose would have to spell out and that comics can let the viewer feel. In response to my question about struggling with the process of remembering, drafting, writing, and drawing an autobiographical comics panel, this student noted: "The

biggest struggle was deciding how much of the memory I wanted to show and how honest I wanted to be about it. Even though I remember it clearly, turning it into a comic brought back some of the old emotions like sadness that I felt at the time. I also had a hard time choosing which parts to include because the real moment was more emotional and complicated than what I could fit into a few panels”. Others similarly reflected, noting “I struggled with staying in the moment instead of explaining it. Translating a big emotional decision into a simple visual and short description was the hardest part,” or “The hardest part was deciding how much of the memory to include without overwhelming the piece. The moment itself is layered and sensory, yet a comic thrives on brevity. Balancing factual honesty with the economy that a visual narrative demands was challenging; I wanted the truth without the clutter. Revisiting that farewell also stirred emotions I hadn’t expected. Real memories are messy, but panels must be precise, and fitting one into the other required careful trimming”. This last reflection aptly captured a tension in comics: the balance between narratological demands and aesthetic choices.

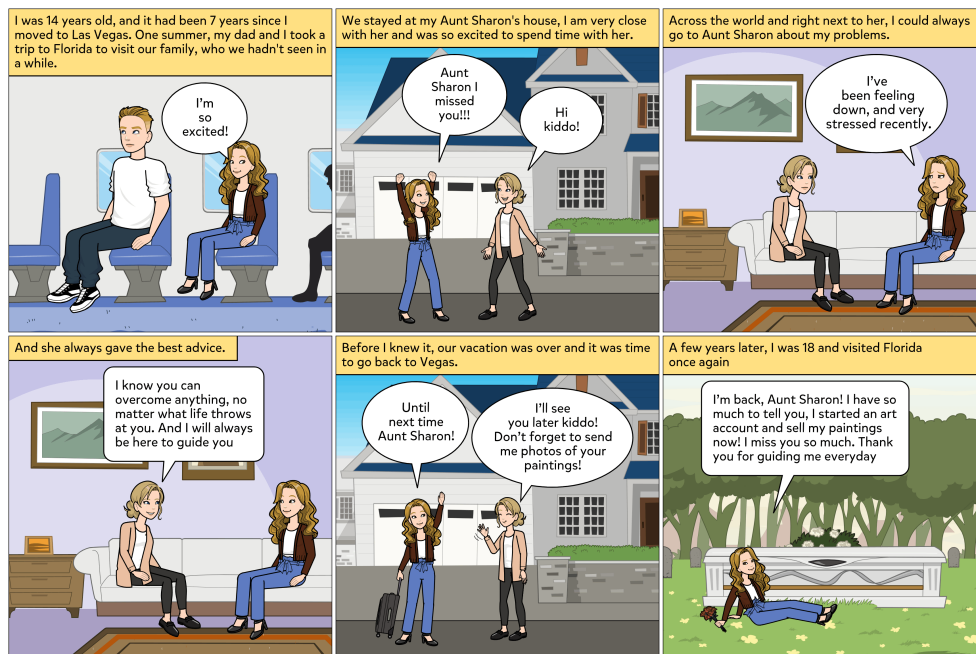


Figure 2: Student comic strip example.

In addition to admissions about the difficulty of creating a six-panel comic, I was interested in discussions about the difficulty of accessing memory. Many students noted that remembering was made easier by the first part of our autobiographical workshop since they recalled a turning point that had occurred in recent memory. But, for others, who either chose a memory temporally farther back or one that was filled with trauma, the process of recalling was more challenging. For me, these admissions were interesting to read through due to the layered process of recalling trauma. One student noted, “The memory came back in pieces, starting with the strongest visuals like the flag and my mom beside me. The emotions returned first, and the small details filled in as I focused on the scene”. Another noted, “Thinking back on this memory was emotional. It brought up feelings I thought I had already handled. It was challenging to place myself back in that moment and experience those emotions again, but it

also helped me understand how much I have grown”. Lastly, one mentioned the usefulness of the mind map, noting, “I was really grateful for the mind mapping assignment because it helped me access that time in my life that I had not revisited in so long. When I decided to write about my boarding school experience, it felt daunting because those first few months were so traumatic for me. I was also in a very negative headspace because I had just lost my father. It expended quite an amount of energy going back to those days, but when I started making the mind map, my thoughts began to flow effortlessly”. Scaffolding through the mind map, free write, and autographic proved effective, with numerous students commenting on the step-by-step approach that helped them to access their memory, process their emotions, and produce creative work.

Ultimately, these reflections on the process of remembering and the difficulty of crafting autographics dovetailed well with our course reading. Considering the effort that Art Spiegelman and Marjane Satrapi put into the creation of their graphic memoirs, this was a point that I wanted students to relate to. For Art Spiegelman, he could not conceive of another medium to express his confrontation with his parent’s survival of the Holocaust. As he notes in *Meta Maus*:

What is most interesting about comics for me has to do with the abstraction and structuring that come with the comics page, the fact that moments in time are juxtaposed. In a story that is trying to make chronological and coherent the incomprehensible, the juxtaposing of past and present insists that past and present are always present – one doesn’t displace the other the way it happens in film. (2011, p. 166)

Spiegelman, arguably the “father” of autographics, points to the medium’s temporal logic: the comics page lets past and present coexist on the same surface, refusing the sequential displacement of film.

And yet, for Marjane Satrapi, what took longest when she was drawing her autographic, *Persepolis*, was the process of remembering. In the press kit for the *Persepolis* film, she states, “I make an important work of memory, I wrote a lot and I leave out all that is not essential. Inking afterwards do not take me much time. If I need a year for a book, it is because of this work of memory” (Satrapi & Paronnaud, 2008). Similarly, Jane Tolmie notes in her study of Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, there can be an unreliability of memory in memoir writing, which the writer is attempting to work through in testimonial fashion (2013, p. 6). This is often due to trauma, about which Cathy Caruth sagely observes “to be traumatised is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (1995, pp. 4–5). These recalled images, later transferred to paper and even digital formats in the comics form, present autographic authors the opportunity to tap into the multi-layered visual and textual system to represent trauma in terms that Chute and Polak insist are ethical” Chute, 2010, p. 3; Polak, 2017, p.17).

What makes comics specifically (rather than multimodality in general) suited to this work of memory is the form’s structural relationship to time and space, and to reader engagement. As

Thierry Groensteen observes, comics encode time in space through what he terms “spatiotopia”: the arrangement of frames and gutters on the page produces a temporal experience that the reader assembles rather than merely observes (2007, p. 23). Scott McCloud names this type of assemblage as “closure,” or the imaginative leap by which the reader transforms two static images into a single, moving idea (1994, p. 66). Closure asks something of the reader that prose does not: in the gutter between two panels, meaning depends on what the reader brings, what the reader remembers, and what the reader is willing to imagine. Thus, in comics, the metacognitive recognition is significant to the relationship between text and image. Groensteen, McCloud, and Charles Hatfield all note the interrelationship between verbal and visual cues of comics, noting, “the process of transitioning, or closure, depends not only on the interplay between successive images but also on the interplay of different codes of signification: the verbal as well as the visual” (Hatfield, 2005, p. 44; Polak, 2017, p. 13). Kate Polak extends this implication into ethics, arguing that the construction of the page, “highlighted by the gutter, creates a space of imaginative possibility” where embodied simulation operates at the imagistic level (2017, p. 17). For students composing six-panel comics, this artful negotiation matters since as authors, they must choose which moments to render, which to leave between the frames, and which to trust the reader to complete. They are not only telling their stories but designing the closure work their classmates will do. The conversational record comprised of twenty-four comics on the discussion thread becomes the visual and textual fabric quilting together students’ autobiographical experiences. The workshop evidences the notion that students have internalised comics as a form asking its viewers to participate in meaning-making.

While Caruth’s account of trauma as possession has been foundational to trauma studies, more recent work in Life Narrative studies have emphasised the relational and ongoing dimensions of traumatic memory. Gillian Whitlock terms this dynamic the “testimonial transaction,” a “fragile and volatile performative relation between those who testify and those who give witness” (2015, p. 142), in which the reader is interpolated into the witness role (p. 141). For autographic writers, this relational frame matters because comics’ visual structure literalises the work the reader is asked to do. Each gutter is a site where the reader closes a temporal and emotional gap between two images, often carrying the affective charge of trauma across the gap. As Kate Polak observes, the construction of the page invites embodied simulation, drawing the reader into the protagonist’s experience through the imagistic system itself (2017, p. 15). The result is not a single ethical claim about representation but a dynamic exchange, one my students articulate firsthand as they decide what to show, what to leave between the panels, and what to entrust to the witnessing peer. In this sense, students composing six-panel autographics rehearse, on a smaller scale, what Spiegelman and Satrapi accomplish at length: the repackaging of personal and shared cultural trauma into narrative forms that travel between author and viewer. Their reflections, especially those written in the wake of more difficult turning points, name this as a process: the mind map gives them entry, the comic gives them compression, and the discussion thread gives them an audience prepared to receive what they have rendered. Thus, on the image level, comics firstly have the unique ability to represent the seemingly *un-representable*, that which is difficult to put pen to paper. Secondly, in testimonial comics, it allows readers of autobiography and historical fiction alike, to witness these

moments alongside the autobiographical avatar to create a space for social justice writing to operate. There is a visualisation that can create empathy through the shared perspective of the central figures (Polak, 2017, p. 15).

Student reflections of the self on the discussion post, alongside interactions with others, therefore, demonstrate a narrative approach at work in the classroom. What began as the relational dynamic of the assignment becomes, by the end of the exchange, a process of self-reflection and mutual transformation. During the process of self-reflection, students are first asked to conduct narrative inquiry about the self. In so doing, they meditate on the process of identity formation and capital. Secondly, as part of a larger narrative exchange, they are then asked to respond to multiple classmates' posts. What can ensue is a delicate exchange of thoughtful autobiographical disclosure and empathetic witnessing that results in a deeper understanding of others, thereby, resulting in mutual transformation (Tavecchio & Pazargadi, 2020, p. 243).

Taking this multimodal scaffolded approach allows students to reproduce the very strategies and aesthetics they are evaluating in my courses. Robin Jocius (2020) notes that digital tools are assisting students to create multimodal compositions that allow them to better synthesise and share their identities. As outlined above, the CLICK model's emphasis on incremental composing was the most characteristic of my workshops since students engaged in gradual production through their mind maps, short narratives, and autographics. Jocius notes that a benefit of these types of incremental composition assignments can be that students "develop sophisticated knowledge of composing techniques" while building "relationships with each other across time" (2020, p. 154). Indeed, I noticed that students reflected confidence about writing their narratives, in addition to demonstrating camaraderie with one another on their discussion posts.

Final thoughts: The implications of accessing autobiographical memory

As Susan Bluck notes in "Autobiographical Memory: Exploring its Functions in Everyday Life," it is important to consider the topics being remembered and the dynamics between those who are sharing and receiving memories (2003, p. 119). In a classroom, this relationship is that much more interesting to observe between strangers (for the most part) as they disclose to one another moments from their past. With only a few guidelines for civility to consider, I found that my students did not need my guidance to express empathy towards one another in exchanging their autobiographical narratives. Often, an outcome that came from this exchange of memories was intentional reflection and decision-making about the future. Bluck draws on D.B. Pillemer's work to note that people can recall "specific moments or events and use their memories of the traumatic and pedestrian experiences to guide them towards successful functioning and away from repeated failure" (Bluck, 2003, p. 119). Thus, one of the direct functions of autobiographical memory is to use specific moments or traumatic memories to form and shape narratives about the present and the future (Pillemer, 1998). This is often a takeaway I have seen from students reflecting on their autobiographical projects. They begin to situate and contextualise how their specific turning point moment fit into their past, present,

and even future. In a composition class that asked students to explore the power of one's voice, I was delighted to find that many students wrote with conviction to proclaim their *raison d'être* after reflecting on their life stories. Many seemed to reconfirm their conviction in finishing their university degrees to impact the communities around them. It is my hope that educators, particularly those passionate about Life Narrative studies, consider how they can scaffold this life writing process for students, who may be better able to self-actualise, and more empathetically connect to one another against the backdrop of life-changing literary texts.

Notes

[1] I am using multimodal here to specifically reference the diverse collection of assignments resulting from my two autobiographical workshops: a mind map, reflection, comic strip, and discussion post.

[2] Gillian Whitlock coined the term, “autographics,” to “draw attention to the specific conjunctions of visual and verbal text in this genre of autobiography, and also to the subject positions that narrators negotiate in and through comics – features of discursive frameworks” (2006, p. 967). This is a useful term to use in reference to the creative fusion of life writing and comics, even the six-frame comics from my course workshops.

[3] After running this workshop for four semesters in numerous English literature and composition courses, I am convinced that its autobiographical focus and scaffolded structure discourage the use of AI to complete the assignment. Students show passion in discussing an aspect of their lives, and the scaffolded submissions demonstrate gradual, measurable progress. Since I prohibit the use of AI in my classes, more than ever, I find this type of assignment particularly valuable as it encourages student investment and authenticity.

[4] All student work was obtained with permission from students for the use of this article.

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