

The Value-Added Dimension of Key Blended Learning Assignments in a First-Year Composition Class

A project overview

This narrative essay relates how the presence of a difficulty, a challenge, in a service learning course in life writing led to the use of reflective writing assignments in the blended learning style and to the discovery following their use of improvements in the writing skills of the English 101 students taking the course. As a narrative, the essay does not employ test groups, medians/modes, control groups or other wonders of social science research. Those will arrive in the fall when this discovery will be tested again in an upcoming English 101 in which I will employ the same course structure of a service learning course in life writing. My sense of innovativeness includes such reaching after solutions when problems arise in class. The proposal to this conference was a first effort to reflect upon the significances of what was happening in this teaching situation.

The English 101 course in life writing at Oxford College of Emory University involved a service learning project in which students paired with a Newton County, GA, resident and recorded six hours of taped interviews. During the semester, two pedagogies were employed. For the first half of the course, we employed the time-tested traditions of autobiographical writing assignments, the application of a writing rubric (**Appendix 1**), and class discussion combined with peer review. Then in the second half of the course, primarily because of the discovery that in conducting the service learning portion of the course we were losing valuable minutes devoted to writing, the writing process, and particular students' essays, I added a number of blended learning assignments.

What can be shown, and this was not set up from the beginning by course design, is that the majority of students demonstrated improvement in writing, even more so, after the employment of the blended learning assignments. It struck me as strange and good for this to happen, so now I have begun to reflect upon the impact of the out of class assignments. What is most provocative to me is that most students' writing began to improve more dramatically, even as the difficulty of assignments increased. My initial conclusion is that blended learning assignments maximize class time through the timing of feedback and guided class discussion following the reflective blended learning assignments. This paper proposes to accomplish five things: 1) to describe the traditional components of the first part of the course in terms of pedagogy, the rubric, and class discussion; 2) to place the BL 'experiment' in the context of existing blended learning efforts and literature; 3) to demonstrate the impact of the blended learning assignments of this particular course through examples of student writing, 4) to consider briefly several other factors contributing to the improvement of the student writing, and 5) to look ahead to further refinements of this pedagogy in future writing courses.

The traditional components of the course

This course in life writing called upon several academic features—the genres of biography and autobiography, service learning, and both oral and written forms of communication. Students were asked to read and study biographies/autobiographies, write

several autobiographical essays, and then move into the primary challenge of the course—to record conversations with and write several essays about a person who lives in Newton County, Georgia. The progression of class activities moved from reading and discussing qualities of the genre, to applying these ideas in writing personal essays, and then to using the ideas to manage the difficulties of writing about another person. In the taping of many hours of interviews with Newton County residents students were given the opportunity to develop a body of information with which they worked to make choices and to develop essays about the person they interviewed. After the taping and note taking occurred, the students generated a number of essays on that individual's life—a profile, followed by two different dramatic moment essays.

In the classroom for the first part of the course, we discussed the life writing genre as expressed in the four required books and developed a rubric [**Appendix 1**] for evaluating their autobiographical essays and their writing skill. They produced several essays during these weeks, and with each one I provided detailed feedback with which they undertook a second draft of the essay. Each class became a laboratory for examination of the literary genre of life writing, for discussion of their writing in terms of the feedback and rubric we were using, and for preparation for the tasks ahead of them, namely to records interviews with someone they just met, analyze the tapes, and produce life writing essays of their own, much like the ones we had been reading in class.

Because of the shift of attention to these tasks, I needed to devise other learning opportunities for them to reflect, to write, and to remediate their surface errors of various sorts. The online environment of blackboard was there, and I had facilitated a session on blended learning at the Oxford College Institute for Pedagogy in the Liberal Arts in May 2008 and written a brief article on blended learning afterward for the *The Teaching Professor*. So it occurred to me that applying the blended learning pedagogy might be the best way to help them continue on into the second half of this course.

The literature of the BL pedagogy

It may be helpful to clarify what is meant by the use of the phrase 'blended learning.' Blended learning has received significant scholarly attention in recent years in books by Garrison and Vaughan (2007), Picciano and Dziuban (2007), Bonk and Graham (2005), and Mantyla (2001), in a number of academic journal articles, in a plethora of (and some of them very fine) powerpoint presentations from pedagogy conferences, and in various materials of faculty resource centers. The University of Calgary's Teaching and Learning Centre has what is becoming a typical program, "Inquiry Through Blended Learning Program," directed by Norm Vaughan. In 2006, the University of Hertfordshire hosted its first annual conference, "Blending Learning: Promoting Dialogue in Innovation and Practice," and that conference alone offered forty-eight sessions involving the concept. There are also numerous BL applications in sessions offered by pedagogy conferences, such as the one we offered at Oxford College of Emory University last May at our own Institute for Pedagogy in the Liberal Arts. Institutions of higher education in Canada, Australia, and Europe have made significant contributions to blended learning as well, and a growing number of businesses have invested in blended learning workshops as an effective means to train, educate, and sometimes retrain employees and

management. So what is this innovation? Charles R. Graham offers three current definitions of the blended learning pedagogy and then explains why only one of them is accurate:¹

- Combining instructional modalities (or delivery media)
- Combining instructional methods
- Combining online and face-to-face instruction

He goes on to argue that “The first two positions reflect the debate on the influences of media versus method on learning. Both of these positions suffer from the problem that they define BL so broadly that they encompass virtually all learning systems” (4). Hence, for Graham and also for Garrison, Vaughan, and most of the other scholars using this pedagogy, the fundamental concept involves combining in class (also called ‘synchronous’ or ‘face to face’ teaching/learning) and out of class (asynchronous) teaching/learning, with the best of both being employed in the same course. Developing ways that these two contexts interweave, connect, and touch each other is the challenge and excitement of a blended learning course.

This methodology is not primarily used as a means for institutions and university administrators ‘to enhance efficiency,’ a euphemism for cutting costs. In a Brigham Young University study from 2003, the ‘efficiency’ motive was central. The study focused on two ways of teaching the required introductory composition course at BYU. Blended learning as one way to deliver the course was compared to resident face-to-face classes in order to determine whether any quality was lost by going to an entirely online environment. (While the BYU notion of blended learning course involving merely the online environment is NOT the BL concept, it is interesting that the study found that successful online learning composition courses had a high level of satisfaction compared to resident face to face classes. As an aside, the really good online experiences that students have seem to support the idea that we do have a powerful tool in this delivery option.) But matters of cost saving efficiencies aside, those of us who practice BL do so because it works, not because it is easy, simple, timesaving, or worksaving. So, I would adopt the idea that BL models ‘learning efficient’ more than ‘cost efficient.’

In a recent book, Garrison and Vaughan (2007)² argue that BL exhibits several clear features:

- Thoughtfully integrating face-to-face and online learning
- Fundamentally rethinking the course design to optimize student engagement
- Restructuring and replacing traditional class contact.

Finally, the way that I described the process in a recent article is as a recurring cycle of online assignments, submission of these materials before class time, the application of these materials in succeeding classes, followed by a redirecting of out of class work again to continue the cycle. Essentially work written/studied/completed by students out of class becomes essential and important to what is done in the face-time meetings.

¹ Curtis Bonk and Charles R. Graham, *The Handbook of Blended Learning* (San Francisco: Pfeiffer, 2005), 4.

² David Garrison and Robert Vaughan, *Blended Learning in Higher Education* (Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 5.

The student progress

As Emory University freshmen, the Oxford College students are among the best incoming first semester students around. That is not to say that their surface level (or deeper level, for that matter) grammatical problems are nonexistent. Quite to the contrary, and out of class online learning (asynchronous learning) can be accomplished in these areas as well. It's my thinking, particularly after this class, that challenging students to study concepts through reflecting on the larger aspects of the writing process can pay larger dividends for the rather strong liberal arts college student. To have them reflect and write seriously outside of class in blended learning assignments about the concepts and tasks of the discipline and the writing process in order to develop their skill will enable them to progress as writers more readily. In writing narratives about writing, I asked them to produce brief meta-narratives about the components and processes of writing.

Using one early and one late excerpt from two students, we can draw some comparisons between their early and late semester essays in terms of development of the lead, use of dialogue, description, and the conclusion. The two students I have chosen are not the strongest students in the class, nor are they the weakest; one is a male student in pre-med who made a B in the course and the second is a business major who made an A-.

Pre-BL essay excerpts:

(Student 1)One could say the story I'm about to tell defines my life. This experience has directed me towards a lifestyle, an occupation, and essentially where family and fellow peers wanted me to be. You could even say the story I'm about to tell is the reason I'm at Oxford College, sitting in my jail cell of a room writing this essay. Sure, like most people I've had experiences that make me who I am. I could tell you other things I've done or gone through. For instance, I had an unexpected appendectomy this year, which put a damper on the summer. I've also traveled the world and seen things that most people could never imagine. I've played piano concerts, learned guitar and started a band. I have also had my share of fights in the hockey rink, but you may want the most influential story. Well here it goes. I feel like I've retold it so many times on numerous occasions to all sorts of people, and there's usually one question all of those people have to ask: "So Dylan, what do you want to do with your life?"

[his conclusion] Recently after the accident my mother endured food poisoning. The doctors couldn't figure out what had happened. She was on the brink of death, but with prayer and a touch of luck she eventually made it through. We spent many nights at Emory Eastside. It turns out the very same doctor who saved her life ended up meeting me this year. He was my surgeon this summer. I was always getting sick when I was a child. I was in the doctor's office all the time. I missed half of the first grade with the flu and who knows what else. Just this summer I had an allergic reaction and had to have an I.V. in my arm and two more in my hands for surgery a couple weeks later. All of my experiences were important, but that first one set my mind to become a pediatrician, so here I am. I'm studying at Oxford to go into the medical field.

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(Student 2) I distinctly remember the emotions I felt when I saw my father for the first time, years after our separation. And those emotions could certainly not be characterized as elation or delight, as one might expect. I remember grasping onto my mother's right hand as my brother held onto her left while we stood in Heathrow Airport in London those many years ago. At the time, I did not know why we were there. We were waiting for something or someone and no one was talking or telling me what it was, but I had learned to be a patient girl.

[her conclusion] When I saw this man for the first time in the airport, it took longer than it should for any child to cognitively label him as my father. But when I knew, I was so overwhelmed with adoration and a million other emotions that I began to cry uncontrollably. I had spent so many long hours just thinking about this man that I barely knew about and now he was back and everything I had held inside my mind for years was spilling out in my tears where everyone could see. I had become so introverted, so used to keeping to myself, that I frightened myself with my own tears. I was uncomfortable here because I just could not control myself. I felt vulnerable. All these thoughts and feelings I had for him and everything I had wanted to say for so long, but could not, were all at the forefront of my mind now and it was almost unbearable. I wanted to scream, I should have been immediately happy, but I felt completely bombarded and ill prepared. My stomach turned with all that I was experiencing.

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The writing is not bad on the whole. Both students have a sense of the dramatic moment (the topic for this first essay they wrote), both have a way of looking inward for key feelings and thoughts, and both seem to move ahead toward resolution of the conflict of the moment. Still, in class even in the early essays we had discussed ways to 'show, not tell,' and the timing of summary and description, and the use of dialogue. We had discussed how summary speeds up pace and description slows it down. These early essays reveal some strengths as well as a lot of room for improvement. In each case, the lead, use of dialogue in terms of placement and timing and accuracy of voice, and the minimization of abstract nouns, the 'be' verbs, and sentence variety, indicate areas in which these students need to work. In a traditional composition class, the way ahead would have been clear: practice through multiple drafts and new topics, lively class discussion over various aspects of individual essays and the writing process, and use of our class rubric. All of these efforts are regularly rewarded with identifiable improvement in student writing.

However, just after midterm, as the class became increasingly dedicated to the interviews, the tapes, and the writing of new essays in the biographical mode, I feared that good progress would lessen if we did not find a way to continue developing the qualities of good writing. The blended learning assignments represented one way to provide for this continued analysis and practice. What follows are three examples of the kinds of asynchronous assignments the students completed as we moved our focus away from autobiography to biography. Each of the following assignments was placed on blackboard, each required them to

write rather lengthy responses based on analysis and reflection of some aspect of the writing process or rubric, and each was due at least one full day before the next class. In this way, I could read them, grade them in cases where assignment points were fitting, and fashion my in class discussion as my response to what they had written.

Blending Learning assignment #3: a focus upon writing process. *This time, rather than work on external materials, I want you to focus for a page or two on the process you went through in the current dramatic moment biographical essay. You may simply describe what process you undertook, what decisions you made as to scene, title, arrangement, main idea, and so on. Please use your insights and also refer to the grading rubric that we have been using in discussions of previous essays for our class.*

Blending Learning assignment #4: *Respond to the criteria of the rubric by applying three of the criteria to your own work and to current essays. (One to three pages)*

Blending Learning assignment #5: *Select two of the most difficult criteria for you and explain what you are doing to work with them and show how you have worked with them in at least one essay.*

While the above three assignments are representative of the reflective approach I applied to these assignments, other kinds of asynchronous BL assignments certainly were used. I assigned individualized grammar work, for example, as a second blended learning assignment for specific students to undertake and complete before the next essay. I also assigned 'dummy' paragraphs created explicitly for the purpose of identifying grammatical problems, and sometimes students did these online and sometimes we read them in class sentence by sentence.

More important to note, these three BL assignments look very much the same as the kind of topics the class might have discussed together early in the semester, but what is different is that in requiring every student to spend a great deal more time in reflecting, scrutinizing work, and writing on the aspects of their essays and the writing process outside of class, I think they were pressed to work on their writing in a way that they had not before.

In being asked to reflect and write on the broader aspects of the writing process, students stumbled at first; they did not know what to say/write about the pattern of organization, the use of summary and dialogue, or the close of the paper. That is, they had been asked to do certain tasks as we had discussed them IN class during the first part of the course. In the blended learning assignments, the stage became their own; they were given the task of reflecting first and then explaining what process, difficulties, solutions they utilized in applying the concepts of the rubric. **[See Appendix 2 for samples of their responses]**

I found that in having to respond to these assignments and to produce meaningful sentences about the concepts, they had to go back to their essays and study them for the presence and use of these elements. Our classroom discussion on the writing process really took off once they began to write reflective responses on the terms that we would have

ordinarily used in class discussion alone. They were defining terms now and identifying examples of them in their own essays, and whether they did a good or poor job of this was not the central usefulness of the BL responses. I could more readily identify where they thought they were in terms of understanding and prepare what I had to say before class and speak in a more relevant way during classes.

What I began to notice after the class discussions following the blended learning assignments is that what they had generally lacked before in terms of dialogue, summary, and description, was beginning to manifest a stronger presence in the biographical essays. I would like to give two brief examples of this change, which to me was remarkable, and caused me to wonder what was happening in the minds of the students.

Post-BL excerpts from student work:

(Student 1)After I had graduated high school, the first thing my father said to me was "Go on, JP. Pack your things. Classes start at Clarke College soon." That was the whole conversation about what I was doing after high school, and I hadn't much choice but to go to college. While I was doing my school, my father had come to the point where he couldn't see too well. He was sent to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, where my sister had a teaching job. After the diagnosis, I went over to Rochester by train. He had a brain tumor. As I left the train station, I was walking down the street, across from a white woman and her son. The boy was pointing and yelling "Mama, look, look, look!" So I looked around and couldn't hear much but the mother saying "No, no, no." So she came over to me and said "I hope my son didn't offend you." I replied, "Well what did he say? I didn't hear him." She explained, "Well, he has never seen a black person before."

(Student 2)(Rough Draft) As I walk down the busy halls of the Riverside Nursing Home to what I thought would be my final encounter with Dr. Louie Marshall, I quickly scour my mind for any last questions I needed answered or details that I might need clarified. My mind is consumed with every aspect of her life as I had spent the past several days writing biographical pieces about her. I stop at room 301 and knock on the door listening for her voice to permit my entry. There is no response. I open the door cautiously and walk into the dark room. An exhausted looking Dr. Marshall, who has been bed-ridden for several months, turns her head to see who I am and her eyes suddenly brighten up and she manages a weak smile. Her response is both heartwarming yet heartbreaking; it is obvious that I am her only visitor in several days.

I open the blinds of her room to let some light in, as she always asked me to do, and I can feel her eyes following me. I ask her how she is doing. Seeing her ashen complexion, I already know the answer; not good. "I just came back from the hospital," she says. "My fever has been very high all week." I bring up a chair next to her bed so that we may begin our weekly delving into her past.

[See Appendix 3 for other excerpts from student essays]

Other possible factors contributing to the improvement of the student writing

It could be argued, perhaps convincingly, that student writing generally tends to improve over the course of the semester, thus minimizing the significance of the BL pedagogy. Also, further practice with the rubric that we used since the first day will likely bring about improvement of the application of these criteria. It is also arguable that the shift from autobiographical writing to writing the life of another person may have influenced the writing process and its quality.

To these three good points I want to underscore that the blended learning exercises provided students more individual time to spend thinking about the rubric, the writing process, and ways these emerged in their own writing. The logistics of the service learning component of the course, sifting through the oral interviews, discussions of which dramatic moment to select, and how to cope with the obvious shortfalls of the interview process—all claimed more of our class time. So I would say that the insertion of BL into the course is one key change in the way we handled the development of writing skill facilitated through reflection upon and discussion of writing. A significant improvement may be traceable to these exercises and our class' use of them.

Conclusions and further refinements of the BL pedagogy for future writing courses

One conclusion I have is that any conclusions here are preliminary in the sense that the improvements in student writing have been demonstrated only once as a general pattern, so in the coming fall this 'experiment' will occur again with greater rigor.

My job at Oxford College entails working a great deal with faculty, and this semester I have been working with one of the newer faculty on tenure track, an assistant professor of anthropology now in his second year at Oxford College. Last fall, he and I had met a couple times to talk about our teaching, and he expressed some interest in using the online response papers in the blended learning style. I was very gratified to learn that this semester he has begun to use them. In one of his recent emails, he had this to say of an 'aha' moment he had:

"That's helpful. Yeah, next week's still crazy, because I've backlogged a bunch of student recs and a grant proposal review that I agreed to do (for a Canadian research colleague). If we could meet the week after. I was happy with the response papers, because I like doing the anthro thing with fairly open-ended questions. Most students are good at writing focused answers, but they clam up when I ask them to talk in class. The blended learning approach is really cool, a really "I can't believe I didn't figure this out earlier" basic insight. I guess it's easy to get caught up in existing practices." (January 16 email from Dr. Stutz)

Appendix 1

The English 101 Writing Rubric

Purpose:

Audience:

Title:

Lead:

Organizational pattern(s):

Introductory paragraph(s):

Dialogue:

Description and Summary:

Concluding paragraph(s):

Close:

Tone:

Grammar issues:

Sentence variety/length:

Word choice: Concrete nouns and active verbs, word appropriateness:

Specific suggestions:

Appendix 2

Several Blended Learning Responses

(1) Blended Learning #3

The process that I went through with writing my dramatic moment was challenging. The massive amount of information that was provided by the interviewee had to be given a specific priority number to the important events and that is the toughest part because each moment has potential to be an important event. It was also tough doing the Creative part of the Creative nonfiction. I had to keep telling myself that my interviewee was in a different generation than me. In order for the creative part to be plausible, the created part needs to be accurate according to the time period. For example, It is not plausible for me to write that Roy (my interviewee's husband) owned a black Ferrari when clearly Ferraris did not exist back in 1947. I had to do a little extra research on what kind of a car majority of the middle class people owned in 1947 because I didn't know exactly what car Roy owned. Overall the creating part of the creative nonfiction was harder than the profile, which was based on factual evidence.

(2) Blended Learning Response 3

As I began to write this particular dramatic moment, I decided that the best thing to do would be to put myself into the story itself, something that I had not done before. I decided to do this because I felt that it would be the most dramatic way of telling the story; anything else, I felt like, would be just summary.

And so I started the paper with the end in mind, realizing that I would need to get lots of dialogue for this dramatic moment because the wording he used was the perfect amount of description that the paper needed. He talked about things such as the "rivers of students in their black school uniforms streaming down from the hills" that brought the level of imagery to a level far greater than what I would be able to describe with my words had I have wrote the paper in a third person summarization type style.

This dialogue and description helped set the tone of the essay by bringing out the harshness of the scene while still allowing the significance behind it to show through. I knew that this was an important event to him that had made a great difference in his life, and I would not allow myself to be held responsible for disrespecting that.

So I tried my hardest to follow the rule for the three important things that we need to tell a great story: description, dialogue, and summary. And with that choice came an essay that to me fits our rubric pretty well. I feel that the essay's purpose was conveyed in the sense that after reading the essay, the reader feels like he knows one of the reasons behind why Dr. Oliver believes some of the things he does, such as the need to do what is right, but also that we need to turn away from the violence that plagues man. I feel like my audience, which are people related to this TPSL program, can appreciate the thought put into it from a biographers standpoint and can appreciate the dramatic moment itself from the standpoint of someone who is having a biography written of them. I lead into my essay with a statement that should have aroused many questions to the reader: "Who is Dr. Oliver?....Why is he telling things to

someone?... And most importantly, what did he decide to tell?" My title described the images that Dr. Oliver spoke of as he watched the raid on the presidential compound, while also acting as a way to say that the view from the hilltop was like an all knowing view, or a view that brought about a change in someone's thinking.

Blended learning #5: What gave you difficulty?

(1)

When it comes to writing an essay the most current issue I face is the use of organizational pattern. I'm not that bad at it but sometimes I'll reveal too much in the early portion of the essay. Even when I do organize an essay I may time my climactic scene at the wrong time leaving the rest of the essay to be virtually pointless. To fix what I do I usually make drastic changes to my essay. On more than one occasion my essay had to be redone completely due to the structure flaw which correlates with other minor issues like use of dialogue, and the over use of summary after only one descriptive paragraph.

The second issue deals with punctuation in writing my essay. I would use the comma and semi-colon in the wrong places by the rules of the English language. I primarily used it to piece together streams of descriptive consciousness to paint a picture within my essay. I didn't exactly learn how to put it in the right place but I did learn to work around it. Since my first few essays I have been practicing the use of one thought per sentence.

(2)

The essay checklist was helpful when I was thinking of structuring my essay for the second drafts. The first draft helped me to get my thoughts down on paper and the second time around I really employed the criteria with more thought. The purpose was the first thing I thought about in all the essays, which to me meant was the central point of each essay. For example, in my interviewee essays I made sure that my purpose was to capture and bring light to his characteristics throughout the story I was telling which more often than not was showing his strength and ability so surpass all odds. In all the essays I made sure to keep in mind the audience I was gravitating towards, even though it was mainly a story kept and shared between two people. The title and lead seemed to be the hardest in the autobiographical essays I wrote. I wanted to be sure in each essay that the title was like painting a vivid picture of the material that was to follow in the lead, or opening paragraphs. My organizational pattern was similar in all my pieces this semester. I made sure that the story followed a certain chronology in order for it to be an easier sequence for the reader. My use of summary, dialogue, and description has been the most challenging to find a perfect balance of. Most of the first drafts I wrote had plenty of summary and storytelling, whereas the second drafts I delved into more detail and slowed down on the critical moments to give it more dialogue and more meaning. The word choice was more of a choice between which words and verbs to use that could bring the story to life. I tried to be very descriptive in an effort to make the reader feel almost as if they were there or knew the person. The close of my essays have been my favorite. To me, the close pulls together the entire story and hopefully leaves the reader thinking of possibilities or being inspired in some way or another.

Appendix 3

Selections from late semester student essays

(Student 1)After I had graduated high school, the first thing my father said to me was "Go on, JP. Pack your things. Classes start at Clarke College soon." That was the whole conversation about what I was doing after high school, and I hadn't much choice but to go to college. While I was doing my school, my father had come to the point where he couldn't see too well. He was sent to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, where my sister had a teaching job. After the diagnosis, I went over to Rochester by train. He had a brain tumor. As I left the train station, I was walking down the street, across from a white woman and her son. The boy was pointing and yelling "Mama, look, look, look!" So I looked around and couldn't hear much but the mother saying "No, no, no." So she came over to me and said "I hope my son didn't offend you." I replied, "Well what did he say? I didn't hear him." She explained, "Well, he has never seen a black person before."

I had made friends with the woman and the boy, exchanged phone numbers and went on to my sister's. It was decided that my father would have brain surgery. They would drill in his head and remove the tumor, which wouldn't be a problem. The problem was that the clinic would have to keep him in Minnesota for the after care, and he would be totally blind for about six months. It was nerve racking. With my mother already passed, we were extremely worried. About six months later he was sent home. I remember the night. He said "JP, come here, come here," so I went to his room. "JP, I can see that light over there." The smile on our faces was unforgettable. That was one of the happiest moments I had felt in a long time, but he could not see well, and it was recommended by the doctors that he could not teach anymore. I had known we didn't have much money, and although my father resisted, I made sure that we used the college money for the family's needs. I had no job, no college, nothing.

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(Student 2)

English 101

Dr. J. Galle

November 23, 2008

As I walk down the busy halls of the Riverside Nursing Home to what I thought would be my final encounter with Dr. Louie Marshall, I quickly scour my mind for any last questions I needed answered or details that I might need clarified. My mind is consumed with every aspect of her life as I had spent the past several days writing biographical pieces about her. I stop at room 301 and knock on the door listening for her voice to permit my entry. There is no response. I open the door cautiously and walk into the dark room. An exhausted looking Dr. Marshall, who has been bed-ridden for several months, turns her head to see who I am and her eyes suddenly brighten up and she manages a weak smile. Her response is both heartwarming yet heartbreaking; it is obvious that I am her only visitor in several days.

I open the blinds of her room to let some light in, as she always asked me to do, and I can feel her eyes following me. I ask her how she is doing. Seeing her ashen complexion, I already know the answer; not good. "I just came back from the hospital," she says, "My fever has been very high all week." I bring up a chair next to her bed so that we may begin our weekly delve into her past. I begin by asking her about her wedding to George Marshall in 1961. She speaks to me in a glorious amount of detail that I would be able to use in my next piece. My hand moves quickly across my notebook trying to capture each moment as she was describing them to me.

After about fifteen or twenty minutes, we finish talking about her wedding. With no more questions I change the conversation and I tell her that this is probably the last time I would be seeing her. She pauses and smiles, "Well, I'll miss you." Suddenly I feel very strange, I feel like I've been hit with a pang of guilt. I was just a student conducting interviews on her experiences, hardly an important person in her life, and she was going to miss me? Then I think, every week for the past six weeks I had been sitting with her for an hour or two, taking a genuine interest in her remarkable life as a female physician of the 1950's and getting to know her more and more with each visit and I was abruptly taking that away from her. As I am thinking this she says, "I always look forward to you coming to see me," and I feel no better about leaving.

It is painful for me to consider what kind of life she leads in the nursing home that has made her so lonely. I try to avoid imagining her spending all day and all night in bed in a small, dark room, where her most common visitors are nurses who demonstrate little interest in her life whatsoever. I start to realize that what I saw as a series of interviews was so something so much bigger to Dr. Marshall that I had never seen. In a way it was a pseudo-friendship formed between an eighteen year old and an eighty-seven year old. Now that the interviews are complete our conversation becomes more lighthearted. She asks me about my African mother and proceeds to tell me all about her friends from her past, some of whom were also African. We talk about how her daughter and my mother are both pharmacists. She asks me how I'm doing in college and what my roommate is like. It's almost ironic how comfortable we are with each other despite the huge difference in our ages and experiences. I could have had the very same conversation with any of my college friends.

We spend the next several minutes exchanging life stories and laughs. When it comes time for me to leave she asks, "Maybe you can visit me again sometimes?" I tell her, "Of course I will," impressing myself with how happy I had made her by saying that. Upon my return home I have a friend take me to a store to buy an orchid plant to bring to Dr. Marshall for the next time I saw her because, like any good friend, I knew exactly how to cheer her up.

### (Student 3) Therapeutic Dreams

The needle slowly broke the skin and burrowed through the fat into a vein. The small intravenous drip began as the doctor placed a cotton swab and medical tape over the injection site. The doctor carried a host of needles on a tray which he would now treat her with intravenously. Chemotherapy, as Deborah understood it, was getting as many chemicals as possible and injecting them into her. She figured the more chemicals, the more cancer cells died and thus she would get better. The room had an overwhelming stench of sickness, as if the previous patient had slowly rotted away in the room. Although this would be disconcerting to most people, it didn't really bother Deborah. By now she had become accustomed to this process. Each week she was wheeled out of her convalescence home,

lifted into an ambulance and bused to her cancer doctor. She would lie on a medical bed as a catheter was inserted and then the needle. Next she would remain seated as various drugs were used over a two hour period. She didn't really know that the medicine caused programmed cell death (apoptosis) and thus all fast reproducing cells, such as hair cells and intestinal cells were being killed off along with the evil cancer. She just hoped the extensive explanation of the treatment that she had received from the doctor would work and she would be cured.

The white speckles on the ceiling started to swerve and spin as Deborah's mind left the room. Invariably Deborah would doze off now and again as the treatment tended to be monotonous... The crackle of the pins resonated through the alley and Jan, Deborah's sister, jumped up as if frightened by the noise. She waved her arms in the air in celebration as all ten pins lay defeated on the wood. "That *Deborah* is how to curve a ball!" she exclaimed as she danced back to her seat. Deborah grabbed her crutches. Clearly invigorated by her opponent's success, she shuffled up to the ball return and slid her three fingers into the triangle of holes. Despite her disability, she was still able to hold the ball and throw it with reasonable force. She stared down on the pins with evil intentions. First she put down a crutch; next she swung her arm back and simultaneously scooted to the lane. Finally her fingers unplugged from the ball and it jettisoned out onto the smooth finish of the lane. Deborah watched intently as the ball spun left. Slowly it inched towards the crevice between the 1 and 3 pins. The ball hit and the pins exploded, each one falling to the ground. Soon the frames added up and Deborah lost, but she got her best score ever, 128... A crash echoed through the room as the doctor's tray fell on the plain tile floor. Deborah jerked back awake. "Sorry Ms. Miller, just a little accident. I'll come back with the rest," assured the doctor as he began to clean his mess and walk out.

Deborah closed her eyes again. The darkness was more comfortable than the sterile room. Soon the exhaustion took over again and she drifted back to sleep... She awoke back in a hospital room. This, however, was not the same room as before. There were machines all around her all making a distinct beep or buzz. A doctor strolled through the door, "your surgery was a success." Deborah looked at her bandaged leg. "We amputated the leg successfully and you should heal up fine." This was the day Deborah's passion was squashed. Bowling was that one thing that she had. She could bowl just as well as anyone even with her disability. She was normal when she bowled and now that was gone... The doctor slowly tapped Deborah's shoulder, "Ms. Deborah, you're all done." She opened her eyes back to the real doctor's room. The sinking feeling from the dream stayed in her abdomen as she recalled the day her leg was removed. Next Deborah was helped back into her wheel chair and loaded back into the ambulance, just as usual, every week the same.

The nurse wheeled Deborah back into her room. "Ms. Deborah, it's time to wash up," the nurse instructed. The chemotherapy was so strong that if Deborah didn't bathe afterwards she could give those in contact with her tuberculosis. Soon she was all clean and the nurse looked at her intently. "Ms. Deborah would you like a cigarette break?" questioned the nurse. Deborah couldn't think of anyone that deserved one more at the moment. She waited until she was outside in the courtyard under the gazebo and lit one of the two cigarettes she was allowed. The door at the end of courtyard opened and a lanky

college student strode out towards her. In his left hand he carried a purple binder with various papers packed inside and in the other he held a voice recorder. "Hi, I'm Mark. I'm from Oxford College and I've come to interview you," stated the stranger. Deborah looked up at the boy. She stared him straight in the eyes. She was happy to provide him with an interview, but there was no way he would understand her struggle. He had grown up a normal child. He went to school, and now he was in college. The trials in his life were not even comparable to hers. But she would try. She would tell him everything. She would give him insight into her struggle. Maybe, if he really was one of those smart Emory kids, he could piece together a crude compilation of her life and, in doing so, form an image that shows how tough she has it. The frivolities of their conversation were relaxing. Talking about baseball with a cigarette was better than reminiscing about bowling with chemotherapy.

(Student 4) Flight School

"There ain't nothing like the real thing." I've heard that quote from my dad, since I was six years old. But, I never really understood what he meant until my experiences in the air force. No, let me clarify, there is one experience in the air force that I truly believe was essential in my maturation process from a teenager to a full grown man.

I wish I could say becoming an air force pilot is easy. But, I can tell you from experience it is actually the opposite of easy; it's nearly impossible. I first had to go to a basic camp. There, about 200 'wanabee' pilots were put through very rigorous physical training. I would wake up every day to the gruff voice of my captain screaming "50 pushups right now." Essentially, it was the worst way to start off a morning, and the day only went downhill after that.

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