



Teaching Life Writing Texts in Europe

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INTRODUCTION

In 2007, Mirjam Fuchs and Craig Howes, both professors of English at the University of Hawaii, published *Teaching Life Writing Texts*, a collection of descriptions of life writing classes by more than forty, mainly North American university teachers. In their Introduction, Fuchs and Howes explain why they published this collection. As their first reason they state that “the past thirty years have nurtured a rapid growth in the number and variety of courses and programs that study life writing from literary, philosophical, and cultural perspectives. In literary studies alone, biography, hagiography, autobiography, memoir, testimonio, diary, oral history, genealogy, group biography, and a host of other related genres have become the texts selected for a whole range of general and specialized courses.”¹

As their second reason they mention that “over the past generation the study of life writing had greatly expended the nature and range of its subject matter.”² A traditional, general course in life writing, they argued, would start with the gospels or Plutarch,

then move on to the saint’s lives. After some John Aubrey or Isaak Walton, the class would read selections of Samuel Johnson’s *Life of the Poets* and James Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*. Thomas Carlyle’s comments on heroes would represent nineteenth-century biography, and Lytton Strachey’s cool, savage dissection in *Eminent Victorians* of this great-man biographical tradition would bring the course to a close. Sometimes the instructor might forge ahead into psychoanalysis or literary modernism. Sigmund Freud’s

work on Leonardo and case studies of living patients or Virginia Woolf's fictional Orlando might have been discussed.³

The more than forty texts following the introduction mark this evolution of contemporary life writing courses in the United States, with a strong focus on literature in English. Each chapter introduces and explores a specific way of teaching life writing; whether by genre (from modernist texts to sports autobiographies) or by cultural location (from ethnography to gender). Some of the authors explore the field of literary and cultural theory and some describe their teaching methods, assignments and syllabi, while others concentrate on their students' essays. All the essays included in these sections demonstrate an enviable array of different life writing issues, autobiographical writing and interdisciplinary approaches, offering not only the study of texts, visual and plastic arts, films, videos, blogs and other social media, but also the practice of creative autobiographical writing.

Teaching Life Writing Texts is a collection of texts about courses many European teachers can only dream of. Even though Fuchs and Howes indicated that "interest in life writing is international in scope",⁴ some European scholars still seem to think of life writing as a threat to traditional biography as a historiographic subject, or regard life writing solely as a tool to overhaul the traditional boundaries of biography. Although courses on auto/biography and life writing are taught at different universities in Europe, and elements of contemporary life writing issues are addressed in different disciplines like sociology and history, life writing courses, as described in *Teaching Life Writing Texts*, are certainly not taught at all European universities. Also, quite a few teachers of life writing courses have to devise their own curricula and syllabi – as Richard Holmes demonstrated in "The Proper Study?", an essay on teaching auto/biography⁵ – treading on unknown territory and unable to share their experiences with their colleagues. Apart from this, some life writing courses at European universities have had to make room for other courses when budgets are tight, as they are these days. Other university teachers struggle with the institutional framework they have to work in, operating in a specific faculty or masters programme context which poses limits as to which subjects to choose from and to discuss with the students.

Another problem is that, at least in our experience, students often have limited background knowledge. Whereas it has become more "legitimate" for European scholars to incorporate auto/biographical material in their classes, most of the bachelor students we taught or teach tend to think of biographies as 'unreliable', and are convinced that a person cannot be a

subject of serious scholarly research. Moreover, some students have problems questioning the idea of historiography as an objective description of the past. On top of that, not many of them have great reading experiences with auto/biography and if they have, they usually do not realise that a biography is not just another book, but a text belonging to a genre with its own particular conventions, its own history, and its own theory. In other words, most students in our life writing classes at least were and are “theoretically naïve” readers of biography.

While working on autobiographical writing, we encountered other problems. Inviting students to write an essay about their own lives, as we did to introduce the different aspects of writing about oneself, we found that most students reacted with suspicion, stating that this was a matter of privacy and not something they were comfortable to explore in the classroom.

With these problems in mind, we thought it useful to share our experiences with other European teachers of life writing classes, and introduce a new cluster to the *Journal of European Journal of Life Writing: “Teaching Life Writing in Europe”*. In this cluster articles will be published which focus on the daily experience of teaching life writing classes, addressing questions like how to design a course about life writing that logically builds on and follows from your students’ knowledge, expertise and reading experience and does justice to current research as well. How do you explain to students what life writing exactly is? Which primary texts do you read with your students and which theoretical perspectives can be explored with which to tackle those texts? Do you incorporate autobiographical writing by your students in your classes, and if so, how do your students react to this?

With this cluster we aim not only to share experiences, but also to inspire teachers who are planning to teach life writing classes in the future. Our goal is to set up a network of teachers and organise regular meetings, preferably during the bi-annual IABA Europe conferences. Inviting all of you who teach life writing classes in Europe to share your experiences with us, we hope this will be the start of a fruitful exchange of experiences and advice on the matter of teaching life writing in Europe. Please send you articles, with a maximum of 2500 words, to: m.f.soeting@vu.nl.

To start off this cluster, we invited Marilyn Zucker, an American teacher of life writing, to share her experiences teaching life writing classes in Europe, which she did in 2010 at the University of Lisbon. In “ ‘Memory to Ink’: Autobiography Project in Portugal” Zucker not only reflects on the differences between teaching life writing classes at North American Universities on the one hand and European universities on the other, but also offers useful practical advice.

NOTES

- 1 Fuchs and Howes, *Teaching Life Writing Texts*. The Modern Language Association of America, 2008: 1.
- 2 Idem: 2
- 3 Idem: 2–3.
- 4 Idem: 2.
- 5 In: Peter France and William St Clair, *Mapping Lives. The Uses of Biography*. Oxford, Oxford University Press 2002: 7–19.