

## **Reading Autobiography: Reflective Writing as a Strategy for Online Engagement**

Robert A. Griffin  
University of West Georgia

Students routinely share how much they enjoy this writing assignment. While completing, those who wish also post their autobiographies to a class discussion board and reply to each other's pieces. This self disclosure works to bridge physical distance and establish meaningful connections in an online class (Faulkner et al., 2023; Song et al., 2019).

I also share my reading autobiography on the discussion board, as I affirm effective online instructors should also serve as mentors who actively seek ways to inspire students (Martin et al., 2019). My childhood struggles with reading to communicate the potential of the case study task that lies ahead:

My parents, while well intentioned, were not well educated, and they did not read to me during my formative early years. I was placed in a special class for struggling readers throughout my long, arduous, often painful journey through elementary school, I remember being stuck with the label of "poor reader." My sense of self-efficacy took a hit by this albatross I carried around my neck.

I document how, with the support of several teachers who chose to believe in me, I eventually reclaimed my self-efficacy. As a testament to those teachers' influence, I graduated as the valedictorian of my high school class, earned the highest academic achievement award given to an undergraduate, and now hold four degrees in the field of education. The impetus for my academic and professional success I attribute to teachers who looked past my early deficiencies and believed in me. Without them, I wouldn't be where and who I am today as a teacher to teachers. My students have the same potential to be mentors for striving readers who have been weighted with the "poor" label.

Like me, more of my students report childhood struggles with reading than the opposite. Even those who were avid readers growing up recognize others around them were not. The early reading challenges some students face are illustrated in the following excerpt:

Growing up, I was surrounded by many people who did not value reading. My mother did not read to me as a child, and was not introduced to reading until kindergarten. I can remember my kindergarten teacher calling us to the rug and reading stories to the class. I loved listening to the stories because it allowed me to hear about new and exciting things. Even though listening to the stories, I could not read fluently . . . I had a tough time in first grade. My teacher would call on me to read the information on the blackboard, and I could not do so. The teacher labeled me a non-reader.

Opening up to others about these struggles takes courage, yet most students choose to share their autobiographies. The conversations that ensue on the discussion board have helped to create empathic bonds and shared understandings among peers in the class. I have noticed conversations being made that both highlight their shared experiences and show how their experiences differ. For example, a student with a very different cultural background and experiences responded to the student in the excerpt above as follows:

Reading about your challenges with reading growing up made me think of my little brother, who also struggled a lot with reading as a student. In truth, he still does as a young adult. I read everything I could get my hands on as a child. Reading was always ea

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exercise and giving students the choice to share ~~their~~ reading experiences and respond to their classmates has helped to foster an engaging, meaningful online learning environment.

Faulkner, S. L., Watson, W. K., Pollino, M. A., & Shetterly, J. R. (2021). "Treat me like a person, rather than

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