

Arguing Academic Merit: Meritocracy and the Rhetoric of the Personal Statement

Steven Alvarez

ABSTRACT: This article presents a pedagogical model for a sequence of first-year composition (FYC) assignments that encourages students' first-hand interpretations as insiders into the workings of educational meritocracy. I focus on how students negotiate the personal statement, an institutionally privileged genre for the discovery and definition of individual differences, characteristics, and aptitudes. I offer a Bourdiesian model of analysis of the rhetorical tactics students use to legitimate their cultural capital as academic merit. The tactics students enact become topoi for their own rhetorical analyses and arguments, which prove significant when competing for institutional resources.

KEYWORDS: personal statement; ethos; topoi; habitus; meritocracy; autoethnography

The education system failed me for a long time, for as long as I can remember I have loved school. But I remember when trying to read and write. English was my second language, and its words and sounds were unfamiliar to me, which made it difficult to comprehend. Most of the time when reading at school I could not pronounce the words properly. I used to get aggravated and would give up. When reading aloud at school, I'd come across an unfamiliar word, and my first reaction was to look up or just stop reading, waiting for my teacher to recite the word for me. I then continued with the next word. Thinking back now, I believe that my teacher should have made me repeat the word. Instead she let me continue.

—Sharon Romero¹, accounting major, from her memoir fieldnotes, later revised into her personal statement, “Playing the Game”

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When Sharon Romero, a student in my First-Year Composition (FYC) course at Municipal College, finished writing her third draft of her personal statement, “Playing the Game,” she felt she finally had something that expressed what she wanted to communicate, though she still had nagging doubts about how she came across to her audience. She was concerned that her story was too personal and that it might upset her audience of educators. Was she blaming them or herself for her educational hardships? Romero’s intentions were to craft this personal statement for future graduate admissions committees, and she knew the importance of setting herself apart from the pool of applicants. She worried that her admission in her statement would portray her as an under-qualified, weak candidate, but she also didn’t want to seem too proud or entitled. She felt she worked hard, harder than many of her classmates, and she didn’t want a handout. She wanted to earn what she felt she deserved.

As Romero’s dilemma illustrates, arguing one’s merits to an administrative academic audience poses a number of rhetorical challenges. This article narrates the story of how students like Romero, including basic writers or students with basic writing histories, make arguments about their educational trajectories. The students in my Municipal College FYC courses in the spring and fall semesters from 2008-2012 composed personal statements combining autobiography and social critique as they considered their professional audiences and rhetorically situated their ethos around life goals and ambitions. The semester’s assignments focused on educational meritocracy and culminated in students composing personal statements. Students tactically emphasized and minimized aspects of their merits as they understood them in the context of higher education. The task prompted a tangle of specific “character” choices they had to negotiate. Some students mentioned their grade point averages, while some pointed to their merits in athletics, community work, or military service. Financial hardship was also a major theme (but one that students rarely emphasized right away). Students made diverse tactical choices within the constraints of the genre when narrating their merits to the institution.

Personal statements often recall self-presentations. Posing as an unofficial yet professional genre of self-expression in the academy, the personal statement invites students to elaborate on varied interests, academic background, extracurricular activities, goals, and plans. Rhetorically, however, the personal statement serves as a privileged instrument for the definition of individual difference when accounting for personal attributes to an institutional audience. Students discern that arguing a meritorious ethos

is a political act—the institutionalized competitiveness of meritocracy is something they intuit after years of playing the game.

Personal statements often recall high school experiences of first engaging the system of applications to college and for scholarships—a process that often lacks transparency. As topoi, its commonplaces situate a rhetorical and political arena wherein students become visible to the professional world of administrators and enter a reflexive space for social engagement. At the same time, students also know the competitiveness of the job market, which they see as directly related to the educational credential market. The ever-rising costs of tuition and increasing numbers of student debt defaults commodify the educations that our FYC and BW students experience. In such economic circumstances, students struggling with writing feel greater urgency to narrativize their merits in ways that make them more eligible for scarce resources.

Inspired by the possibilities of the personal statement, I designed a writing course for students to critically examine education's basic operating principle of meritocracy. While personally sustaining, the autobiographical writing that students produced also upheld a political and rhetorical institution-serving agenda (Feldman; Pari and Shor). Students' motives in arguing their merits ultimately reproduced hegemonic values of academic meritocracy, which influenced their positioning in the academy and the possibilities for its renegotiation. Arguing their academic merits, students came to a greater awareness of the meritocratic ethos and how it worked to sometimes include or exclude them and structure inequality. In the process, students gained rhetorical advantage in learning better how to play the game strategically. They learned, for instance, that meritocracy is structured like a game, and players develop a feel for the game by either receiving coaching or uncovering the game through critical engagement and reflection. Thus they learned to claim the language of meritocracy as public discourse. Yet as most FYC students wrote their initial forays into the subject of merit, they held themselves responsible for their own educational failures, and less often challenged the responsibilities of teachers or schools for failure. Students rarely questioned competitive educational structures or social privileges. If the games weren't legitimate, so the reasoning went, then everyone would go to college. Most students backed away from critiquing meritocracy, leveling fault on individuals not responding to the game with greater self-interest. Some students, however, were more critical of educational institutions and the meritocracy game in their personal statements. They argued that the competitive individualism of meritocracy was a game not everyone knew how to play.

I read two FYC student examples through the lens of *habitus*, the transposable dispositions and predispositions that organize practices and representations (Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*). *Habitus* reveals how certain *topoi* can situate students' literacy practices to represent competitive social success and failure in the personal statement. Both students articulate their educational encounters with the competitive individualism of meritocracy and demonstrate acute sensitivity to audience in arguing their ethos. They assert their individuality while affirming the legitimacy of schools to assign and assess merits. The genre demonstrates the astute arguments writing students at all levels deploy, using their histories as proofs to their arguments. Students' observations, fieldnotes, journaling, and finally, their personal statements articulate their encounters with competitive individualism in education and bring greater transparency to what administrative audiences credit as personal merit. Such depth of observation into the educational meritocracy has significant potential for rhetoric and analysis in FYC and BW classrooms where students do not always recognize the importance of institutional structures shaping power in their day-to-day lives.

Autoethnography For Exploring Academic Merit

The course design came about through my investigations into the social practices of literacy, and also my history with meritocracy as a first-generation college student. During my undergraduate composition studies at the University of Arizona, and under the guidance of Roxanne Mountford, I had conducted similar ethnographic fieldwork into my own educational trajectory, and I recall learning a great deal from writing this way about my parents, my neighborhood, and my ethnic identity. Drawing from my positive undergraduate autoethnographic experience, I established FYC courses that linked the expressive writing students practiced most fluently and the writing they would practice as university students. Encountering students who came from immigrant families like my own, as well as first-generation college students like myself, I found that my favorite composition assignments engaged students in looking to their lives as arguments. Students' critical literacy for reading the world was always a Freirian concept that spoke to me. And yet, I had the same frustrations of many instructors who hit the walls between students' languages and the standardized English of the academy.

The theoretical implications for bringing autoethnographic methodologies into BW and FYC classes are profound when students question

their social positions as actors in the world and in the classroom (Shor). According to Ira Shor and other practitioners of critical pedagogy, student writing improves with personal uses of literacy. On this student-centered path, I advocate for writing projects that document and archive qualitative research among a class of ethnographers. Students as audience members ask questions for clarification and offer suggestions for adding details or restructuring. Sharing their fieldwork data, students explore their educational histories through the eyes of their classmates as well as their own, and this guides them for coding, critical analysis, and genre awareness (Grenfell, Bloome, Hardy, Pahl, Rowsell, and Street; Hardy; Macedo and Freire; Van Maanen). As educators, we must begin first by thinking about our students' diverse cultural perspectives as they arrive to the institution, and, equally as important, ask students to write about the shaping institutions in their lives—what they question and value, and what their education means for them (Mahle-Grisez 64). The anthropological-Deweyian basis for this practice speaks to students' social experiences and the strengths they bring as veteran participants in a rich cultural, institutional life (Crowley 16-17).

The personal statement is the rhetorical space for students to speak their strengths to their institutions. For the final assignment of the FYC course, students draw from their fieldnotes to compose personal statement essays for internal Municipal College scholarships. For purposes of evaluation, I conclude that the personal statement emerging from autoethnographic research is a practical alternative to standardized writing assignments. Personal statements include students' interests, academic backgrounds, extra-curricular activities, and both long-range and immediate goals and plans—things some have articulated only in thought. Further, personal statements combine astute observations with reasoned arguments. What BW and FYC writers construct as their meritorious ethos represents self-reflection and social analysis. Autoethnography links writing about personal experience with wider cultural significances in the writer's autobiography (Chang; Ellis). When cast as research, students' autoethnography captures topoi students know well, forging a basis for critical reflection and authority (Kirklighter, Moxley, and Vincent; Van Maanen).

Laboring to Learn: Building From Fieldnotes on the Meritocracy

Municipal College (MC) is a public college located in the eastern, outlying neighborhood of a major metropolis in the United States. The commuter campus's 18,000 undergraduates hail from 120 countries and speak over

sixty languages. Historically, the college has had a tradition of graduating first-generation college students. According to school statistics, most of the students who attend MC work over 30 hours each week—approximately 67% work part-time. Both of the students I focus on in this study worked, one part-time and one full-time.

I developed this course design with the support of FYC mandates for general education curricula incorporating interdisciplinary methods for composition at MC. The college had redesigned its general education curriculum in 2008. FYC classes since then had been clustered around cross-disciplinary themes, including writing about social sciences, “hard” sciences, music, media studies, and for my cluster, ethnography/autoethnography. The course design underwent several drafts before emerging as a template for future FYC instructors. I have used the course design from 2008-2012 to teach similar writing units to elementary and high school students across the country and in Mexico.

Unlike the other themes in the FYC curriculum, the ethnography course model was not to build a course mixing a content area with composition methods, but rather it was toward a method of composition and research as content. Other instructors had taught the course and experimented with designing qualitative research projects centered on issues of service learning, gender, and race. I piloted FYC courses themed around “Autoethnography and Education” so that MC students would write about their experiences as “practices” in school settings. Taking a cue from the ethnography *Learning to Labour* by Paul Willis, I steered class discussions, informal writing assignments, and fieldnotes toward students reflecting on resistance to academic authority and scrutinizing the playing fields of meritocracy. Helping students to find moments of unlevel playing fields in meritocracy yields many of the same insights Willis fostered among London’s working class youth, while prompting critical thinking about language, audience, and rhetorical production.

Resisting academic authority, however, can place students in a precarious position. FYC students who have been exposed to the data in Figure 1 below (typically distributed to them by their high school guidance counselors) are apt to reflect on career choices and the increased wealth college graduates earn compared to those who do not attend. Some students may be less familiar with such research, but they sense the data to be true because they know how the game operates, and they understand that school success in some form translates later into economic well-being. Dominant discourses interpret the data to make arguments supporting ideologies of personal re-

sponsibility to succeed or fail in a game where everyone supposedly plays by the same rules. Dominant discourses also make arguments for the economic returns of increased academic credentials.

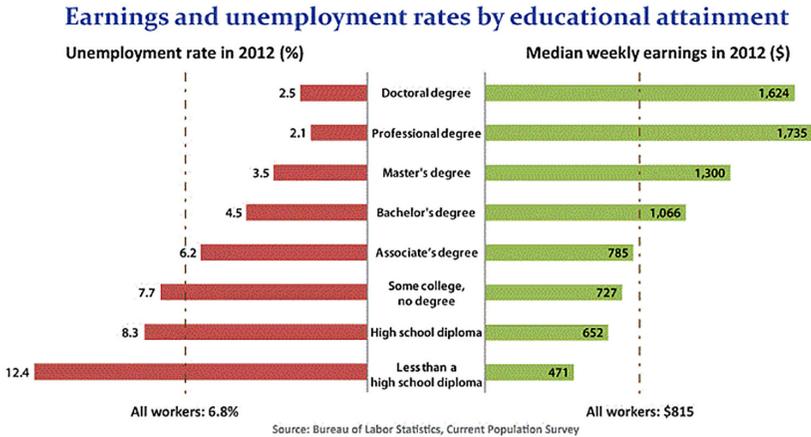


Figure 1. “Education Pays,” U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012

Many if not most MC students lived at home with their parents, were the first in their families to attend college, spoke languages in addition to English, and mostly attended Municipal City public schools. All were familiar with the process of applying for specialized high schools and college programs. They understood that game. Students answered with extensive free-write sessions appraising specialized high school and college tests, the differences between public and private schools, and what they felt standardized test scores measured. Five minute free-write sessions on each topic were interspersed with volunteers reading their reflections to the class. In the time between free-writes, students exchanged writing with one another and composed timed responses. Students shared their shared their responses and spoke to differences and similarities they noted in their classmates’ observations. Identifying with classmates revealed their shared attitudes toward a meritocratic system: the ramifications of the future weighed heavily when they considered conforming to a standard, and when determining how to argue a competitive academic disposition.

Beginning with the diversity of views on their educations, I organized low-stakes assignments where students assessed what they knew of competition for entrance into prestigious selective institutions. Growing up in a metropolis, most students of course had firm opinions regarding privilege; specifically, they took for granted that social class produces inequalities.

They argued with or against meritocracy from complementary perspectives. It was clear to them that on the one hand, meritocracy reproduces social inequality, and on the other, it individuates agency and personal freedom.

Reflexive, informal writing became a basis for more formal autobiographical writing, such as the personal statement. Classroom discussions were especially effective for examining student habitus as social practices and dispositions. For example, we explored the dispositions that lead students to submit to school rules, or to challenge them. Students who play by the rules increase their competitive positions in the meritocracy game, while those who decide not to play are deemed marginal players, or not in competition at all. Several MC students recounted being disciplined over uniform violations. Most students had received some form of detention at some point. I asked if it were ever fashionable to break the rules. One student mentioned that he got a kick out of disrupting class when he was in elementary school. In middle school he stopped, though, for fear of jeopardizing his future. Some students in class agreed that “cool” students broke rules in order to show (although they don't always know it) how rules were not effective at disciplining all students—and some students afraid to step out of line secretly cheered on these rule-breakers. Students formed bonds of playing against the established games of schools. In other words, while schools promoted certain behaviors and success models (sit in your desk, raise your hand, work hard get good grades), these “bad” students, again valorized by their classmates, promoted negative models of behavior and success: disrupting class, vandalism, and confronting the teacher's power head-on (Willis 11, 29, 96). Students desiring success in the meritocracy game cannot follow such patterns or develop this habitus. If so, they risk losing future credential opportunities.

My FYC students revised their informal writing into different formal assignments. Assignments included as formalized fieldnotes, interviews, and a media documentation about their schooling experiences. The ethnographic method was a natural fit for the pedagogy of critical literacy I envisioned. But soon I realized that my assignments could have even more relevance to MC students' lives.

I had a fortunate coincidence of stumbling upon the personal statement assignment. In the spring of 2009, I became aware of the importance of the genre for FYC students when a young man came to my office hours one afternoon seeking advice about writing one. He was applying for campus scholarships, and he needed guidance on what to include in his statement, and he also asked if I had samples he could examine. At the time, I did not. I must admit, I had been unaware of MC's local scholarships for students

until he first pointed them out. I had little experience advising students at MC, and I never looked into practical advice to give students about funding. I really was ignorant on the matter altogether.

A personal statement assignment for FYC seemed justified by way of the value it would have in students' dossiers. The genre offers an opportunity to interpret one's personal story from the viewpoint of self-observer. I was also struck by what would be required of the student to complete these applications successfully. Not least, I realized the pedagogical potential of using the genre to teach argument with personal experience and reflection. I began to assign the personal statement in all my FYC courses at MC from that point on. Students in my FYC courses could use their personal statements for campus scholarships—a book scholarship and miscellaneous \$1000 scholarships. For these MC internal scholarships, FYC students would focus on the criteria as established by donors: how MC helped in students' career goals; and how extra-curricular and volunteer community activities and experiences in the MC community related to students' career plans. Acknowledging the financial possibilities of arguing one's merits also reinforced the economics of the rhetorics of meritocracy in practice and their very real consequences for students.

The Personal Statement and Bourdieu's Habitus: Mapping Dispositions

Social theory research sees language as a primary means for inculcating the games of social structures (Bourdieu; Clark; Gee; Grenfell, Bloome, Hardy, Pahl, Rowsell, and Street; Willis). Such researchers conceive the hierarchical nature of schooling as rungs for inspiring individuals with competitiveness and towards the normative practices of social class (Bourdieu and Passeron; Brint and Karabel). Pierre Bourdieu's logic of practice describes habitus as a game articulated through agents' motives for gaining advantageous positions in competitive fields of culture (*Practical Reason* 98). Habitus thereby systematizes internalized dispositions that mediate between social structures and individualized practical activities, shaped by the former and regulating the latter. Internalized dispositions result from these routinized interactions and shape the practices through which social fields are embodied and reproduced. Figure 2 diagrams the fields of communication in micro and macro contexts. Contexts inculcate habitus as individuals operate according to their learned practical sense and bodily dispositions. Arrows in the model indicate social forces impinging on and reflecting local and larger social fields. The arrows

also indicate the formation of habitus at points of impact between macro and micro forces in communicative contexts. Macro and micro forces situate contact zones of actions, messages, social status, linguistic forms, and audiences. For Bourdieu, social agents develop habitus according to their “feel for the game” (*In Other Words*).

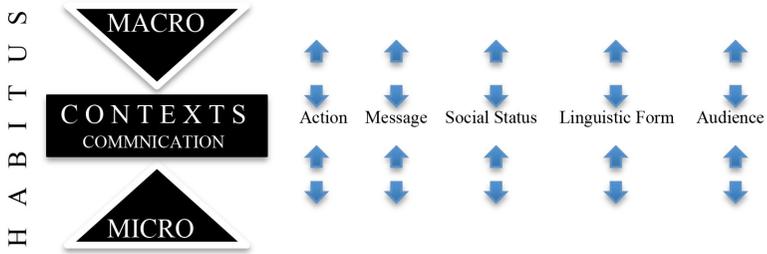


Figure 2. Bourdesian model of situated rhetoric

The pedagogical significance of any self-reflexive inquiry lies in its ability to uncover networks of power circulating through macro and micro discourses. To uncover the layers of habitus is to study the self as situated within particular social and cultural worlds. By way of data accumulated around “the self,” such a pedagogy reveals how society, cultures, and institutions shape personal and collective experience (Bazerman; Feldman). The personal statement affords rhetorical space for demonstrating social awareness as it relates to lived experience and the reactive dispositions necessary for the game of meritocracy.

As an “administrative” sub-genre of professional writing, the personal statement is rhetorically crafted for standardization. It is writing generated for a meritocratic system, affirming the institution’s legitimacy to ascribe merit to habitus. But it is also autobiographical. Unlike the literacy narrative, which too often becomes just another school genre devoid of contextualized purpose and audience, the personal statement affords an opportunity to teach students about institutional rhetoric in practice with specific purposes of analyzing socialized individualism. The personal statement also provides an interesting twist on a pedagogical and rhetorical dilemma by making explicit the constructed nature of ethos in relation to institutional audiences. It provides a corrective to both the sterility of academic discourse and the romanticism of personal writing. Rhetoric in such cases is not only persuasion; it also inheres the necessity of perceiving available persuasive tactics (Bourdieu and Passeron; Burke; de Certeau).

The administrative functionality of the personal statement also has more relevance to students' lives and learning experiences than traditional rhetorical analysis essays. The personal statement communicates a uniquely academic voice, and the *techne* of rhetoric plays an important—if not more important—role of connecting to audience in comparison to traditional academic “essay-text” literacies (Gee; Street). When students make arguments based on lived experiences to win administrative audiences, they strive for sincerity of their merits as ethos. Students argue for personable dispositions deserving merit, while maintaining the formality of distance. The embedded conflicts within the genre make it an apt assignment for students researching the games of institutional inclusion and exclusion. Nevertheless, the genre tends to produce a conservative habitus from students that rarely challenges schools as perpetuating social inequalities. Rather, students bring up points such as their volunteer histories or recount bootstraps narratives. Some students include more about their families than others, and some describe academic awards and honors. Because the personal statement criteria request the information, some students describe financial hardships.

MC students in the FYC course prepared for the personal statement assignment by forming groups of three to research scholarship opportunities on campus. One group found advice fliers from the scholarships office, which we together examined as a class. Students were cautioned by the flier's author(s) to pay close attention to audience:

In writing the statement, consider the audience implied through the application materials and the reading you have done on the granting agency. The personal statement should address this audience directly while creating a full picture of who you are, as a student, an intellectual and an individual. The personal statement should not be a resume in narrative form. You can, however, use the statement to explain or contextualize any gaps or weaknesses in the academic record, and do so in ways that makes these appear either as inevitable or as strengths.

The text further clarified that “A good personal statement will make the committee members want to meet you; it should also induce the scholarship selectors to think of you as the perfect recipient for their award.”

As we read this in class together, I saw a few students gulp. “The audience, notice what it says about audience,” I said.

“What does it mean ‘express directly to the agency?’” one student asked.

I had to open that question to the class to see what they thought. One student said it was a place to help others; another—a business major—clarified that it was more akin to a not-for-profit corporation. With that I spoke of the structures of boards of directors. I asked students to imagine the number of personal statements someone on the board of directors at a major granting company would have to read. “How would you reach this audience? How would you get their attention and persuade them that you are the best candidate?”

That was a hard one for students to answer.

And rightly so. The advice in the flyer pointed out that students must do research into their audience, the readers they will attempt to charm with a sense of their charisma, and what the writers of the advice expect from personal statements. In a few double-spaced pages, students should be “creating a full picture” of themselves so that their intended audiences can appreciate them as students, intellectuals, and individuals. Students should be able to synthesize their ambitions and goals into a few paragraphs that charm in such a way as to make them seem “naturally” qualified candidates. Students who accomplish this do so by shrewdly positioning themselves, emphasizing and minimizing certain personal characteristics, while negotiating the appropriate levels of formality to address their audience. While charming committee members so as to seem likeable, they must also maintain a respectful distance. In strategizing their rhetorical tactics, students must be aware of the major criteria of importance to the granting agency and should do research into what the scholarship requires. With all this planning and strategizing, it was plain to see a great deal of critical work went into writing these “statements,” which are actually more like brief academic, paraprofessional autobiographies. Students intuited the double bind, and I too pondered the dilemma of writers trying to argue their academic merits while learning to navigate institutional and professional mazes.

Amid these anxieties, students grasped the competitive lengths some individuals went to stay a step ahead of the pack. Several FYC students realized there were herds of college admissions applicants applying for few openings, and that gaining distinction from among the scores of applicants who scored high on the SAT exams, earned good grades, won honors, and had strong merits based on community service and leadership was a difficult task.

Students’ fieldnotes overwhelmingly reflected deep-seated ideas about meritocracy and attending college. One MC student wrote, “There are lots of reasons not everyone wants to go to college. The biggest one being that not everyone studies hard enough or works hard enough to first pass high school.”

Similar comments comply with the competitive nature of schooling. Such compliance legitimates meritocracy as it legitimizes those who pass through the system. Compliance also individualizes failure and its rehabilitation. Individuals who continue to fail do so based on their own inadequacies, and not those of their institutions. Individuals who comply with institutional structures—or the rules of the game—reproduce the structures as they compete. Those who embody the legitimate habitus move forward, and those who do not get left behind. Institutions purport to classify students by merit. Students internalize failure and success as individual aptitudes measured by meritocracy, and even more so by the personal responsibility to succeed or fail. Democracy generates aspirations, whereas the free-enterprise capitalist economy generates stratification and anxieties (Cintrón; Clark; Spring).

When judging their own merits against their peers, students notice how their limits differ from those of their classmates. If some students have more intelligence, more talent, more drive, could schools be responsible for scholastic distinctions? Are some students not naturally gifted? These questions are the subjects of much debate, of course. For students, additional questions will arise, including how the meritocracy game means entering into asymmetric symbolic-economic structures, and how students locate themselves within the institutional hierarchies. Students typically answer these questions with more nuanced questions concerning the institutional motivations that lead certain students to accede to and others to resist the games of meritocracy. What does it mean to either play or concede the game? How do institutions solicit play? How could students' language(s) create academic opportunities?

Below, I offer samples of personal statements composed by MC students Janet Mullens and Sharon Romero. Mullens and Romero each argue with distinct ethos, but they both similarly reaffirm the legitimacy of schools to assign and assess their relative merits. Both represent similar relations to the meritocracy game, though each to different extents affirming and/or critiquing the meritocratic hierarchy-machine. Both are also single mothers of daughters. Mullens and Romero write about the importance of being academic role models and providing for their children. The gendered aspect of their personal statements calls attention to additional layers of structural inequalities in education.

Janet Mullens: Playing Within the Game

Janet Mullens, age 37, of Irish and Italian descent, had hopes of becoming a high school English teacher when she graduated MC. She worked

part-time as a teacher's aide at a high school near campus. She was a single mother of a ten-year-old daughter and had come back to college after "many years away from school, living life." She would begin her student teaching a couple years after this course, in the fall of 2008.

Attending college, Mullens claimed, also had positive effects on her future students and her daughter. She specified the importance of parents fostering and developing the academic habitus for their children. For Mullens, examining the merits of success entailed giving meaning and importance to the strategies different people used to learn. As a future teacher, Mullens did fieldwork at her student teaching site to reflect on her daughter's and her own educations. She learned to appreciate how individuals acquired knowledge through available resources and the importance of researching opportunities. Her fieldwork exposed her to the social inequalities of available school resources.

Mullens described herself as a "non-traditional" student when she explained how a disability in her previous career led her to return to college. In the introduction to her personal statement she writes:

Previous to attending college full-time, I was recovering from a chronic back injury. Unable to continue working as a retail store manager for a children's clothing company, I went out on long term disability and decided to return to school to obtain my degree as well as a second career in teaching. Before starting my first semester I became a volunteer learning leader at my daughter's elementary school.

Mullens had hurt herself at work, and this prevented her from performing the same type of labor in which she had made her career. In short, going to college marked a "career-change opportunity," as she termed it. Mullens also credited her work and volunteer experiences with making her a responsible student. The "good worker" habitus is, in fact, essentially identical to the "ideal student" habitus—prompt, stimulated, attentive, responsive, and respectful.

We can see that in terms of ethos, Mullens's argument for her merits claim college as necessary for predicting academic success for her and her daughter. She speaks to her audience as a mentor, mother, and teacher, her voice establishing her credibility:

Returning to college at a more mature age is extremely rewarding. The focus on attaining my goals has not wavered because of the life

experience I have attained. The motivation comes from many areas in my life; however, the most important of these is my daughter. She sees the dedication I have to school and fulfilling responsibility. When her school is closed she may have to come in with me to a class or two. This gives her access to her future at a young age. She acquires an inside view of college at an age that most children will not conjure up an image of what college holds in store. Hopefully her visits will prepare her and enable her to overcome the fears most teenagers have about choosing a college and a career path. She sees me as her closest female role model; the importance of returning to school becomes a valuable lesson in perseverance for her as well.

Mullens cultivates the academic habitus for her daughter by exposing her to college early in her schooling, demonstrating an intergenerational investment of valuable cultural capital. In addition, Mullens narrates how she came to her major at MC and her practical experience of learning about education through the hands-on experience of volunteering in her daughter's classroom. Mullens establishes a sincere voice, demonstrating that she is engaged with education as both mother and schoolteacher.

In her statement, Mullens distinguishes herself with her career change and family values, pointing to the positives of education and thereby praising the meritocracy. This "unconscious" set of etiquettes could only be critically examined if the game of meritocracy had become the focus of scrutiny. Students' emerging awareness of their competitive academic dispositions revealed the social construction of habitus. Students like Mullens learned the rules of the game and played accordingly, thereby reproducing the game. Mullens's statement speaks to this game discourse, but does not necessarily speak against it. She understands how to compete, and she is teaching her daughter how to compete. She had also assigned personal statements to students for her student teaching at a local high school.

Sharon Romero: Critiquing the Game

Unlike Mullens, Sharon Romero spoke against the competitive nature of the meritocracy game. I began this article with an epigraph quoting from Romero's personal statement "Playing the Game," a powerful introduction paragraph developed from one of her fieldnote journal entries. In that fieldnote describing a memory, Romero recounts the disappointment she felt during her early years as an emergent bilingual student. Romero, 25, had

transferred from a two-year collage as an Accounting major. She was originally born in Honduras but emigrated to the U.S. when she was eight. She was a single mother of a six-year-old daughter and worked part-time as a server at a restaurant, closer to the central business district. Romero had completed her degree but her composition course credits did not transfer. She had put off English at MC, she said, “because it gets me down when I want to get finished with school.” She had taken two BW courses at her community college, which she felt added an additional year to her two-year degree. Romero had no time to waste, she said. Her immediate goal was “to have a career so I can support my daughter and get her what she needs, when she needs it.”

As a student in my FYC course in the spring of 2008, Romero made profound discoveries about herself as a writer in the course, about her migration to the United States from Honduras, and her English language insecurities. Romero was one of my most promising students, and last I saw her on campus in spring of 2010, she said she had only two more semesters left until graduation. She finished all her writing classes, but she admitted she squeezed in time to work on a poem here and there. Three years later, she has since graduated from MC and enrolled in a graduate program at another public college. She has informed me via email that she is working on a Master’s degree, and is still working over thirty hours a week at a sports bar and grill, but she can see the “light at the end of the tunnel.” Romero’s personal statement begins:

Somewhere along the line I lost myself. Blaming it on education was my solution. If the mentality I have today applied then, the situation processing, in the struggling to better myself, would not exist. I know you the reader, are asking yourself, “What does she mean?” Explanation in the best way possible: Not being able to pronounce the words I was reading correctly made me fall in the category of not being able to spell correctly. If I can’t pronounce it, how can I spell it? You see, heading for doom from the beginning. Cried many nights because I am a smart girl who endured the most fatal limitation, vocabulary. Not having a voice for a very long time, it pains me. I used to have so much to say with such little words; still struggling with this fact, I don’t let it hold me back, and I speak my mind at all times. I learned to speak up.

Romero powerfully dramatizes her agency as she overcame the challenge of increasing her English vocabulary. She places blame on education early

on in her experiences as a student but later internalizes her “deficits” as her own once she has learned to compete. As her vocabulary expanded, so did Romero’s confidence in meritocracy, though she doesn’t go so far as to account for any assets in her bilingualism.

Romero both challenges and reinforces the game of meritocracy as she transitions from formerly excluded to competitor. When competing with native English speakers early on in her schooling, Romero deeply recalls the unlevel linguistic playing field and the structured inequalities of meritocracy. Romero’s current position as a player in the game, however, champions meritocracy. She continues:

Education systems are built to better all ways of living, so where did I go wrong? I can honestly say now, I went wrong, allowing the education system to fail. I should have demanded more, should have asked why I need to learn this in life. So what if a teacher gave up on me. So what if a teacher pitied me. So what if a teacher looked at me with lost hope. This should only have made me stronger not weaker, (I know this now). I should have fought hard to put myself on top of the game, as some may say it. I should have taken all the negativity and made it into something positive. I should have been optimistic instead of pessimistic.

Today I am optimistic. I don’t look down on this education I’m receiving because college taught me to see how schools work. It’s opened up my eyes. That’s true education, and I value it very much.

Romero’s personal statement pinpoints that she had come a long way in her education, arriving at critical awareness of “how schools work.” She recognizes the social games of merit, yet she also affirms that “[e]ducation systems are built to better all ways of living.” Romero’s early schooling experiences learning English caused her to blame herself for failure rather than the inequality structured into schools. As she gains more experience in the game, however, she turns the game of meritocracy around when she demonstrates agency and an alternative narrative including her rights as a student. Learning how to compete created options for her, and also opened Romero’s eyes that as a student she “should have demanded more.”

The ethos of Romero’s personal statement gains sincerity through the narrative of her overcoming obstacles and taking challenges head-on, the primary one of which was assuming the academic habitus and learning to play the game, positioning her as a contender. Romero mentions she “went

wrong, allowing the education system to fail” and in a rhetorical move gestures toward her audience and her awareness of its and her own complicity in perpetuating the game of merit. Even further, she speaks directly to power, to her audience of administrators, instructors, and donors when she writes the refrain, “So what if a teacher gave up on me. So what if a teacher pitied me. So what if a teacher looked at me with lost hope. This should only have made me stronger not weaker.” Romero challenges her audience to judge her on her merits without knowing her obstacles in life.

Romero’s fieldwork in the course explored her immigrant history, and also her difficult experiences learning English. For her daughter, she wanted more. She had studied her daughter’s school through field visits and taking photographs during different school events. Romero also interviewed her mother and used the data from this to compose a profile of her life in Honduras. She reflected much on the language differences between English and Spanish in her family, and how her daughter was much more fluent than she in English. Romero’s fieldnotes at times were written as poems and other times as dialogues between characters, often in Spanish. She channeled all this material gained from her fieldwork data into her personal statement. The profound sincerity in her voice borders on accusation, yet returns to the idea of reinforcing the meritocratic game, now that Romero had learned to play. Her sincerity affects strong *pathos*. Yet, like Mullens, she reinforces meritocracy, despite critiquing it. As she has learned the game, she plans to compete in it, rather than re-structure it or be excluded by it.

The Ethos of Merit Distinct From Meritocracy

As social actors, students inhabit a cultural economy of ambition, a system that measures how limited available resources satisfy limitless aspirations. This cultural economy is structured in patterns that resemble games that social actors play in different fields to secure resources and positions of power. Some students learn earlier than others how to compete in different fields, and some students never compete because the game excludes them before they fully learn how to participate. It is important to engage students to write from a vantage point critical of themselves within their institutions. Students should all research admissions policies and resources on campus such as student services, clubs, organizations, events, health services, and libraries. They should also further explore requirements for differing majors, as well as classes students recommend and do not recommend. Likewise it is important for students to assess and write about their past and projected educational trajectories.

BW and FYC students will eventually have to immerse themselves in the academic languages of their respective majors or disciplines. In spite of immersion, the wake of these assignments runs short. After our BW and FYC writing courses, our students, without a doubt, will rush to complete essays for a deadline and, once complete, let them fall to the wayside. Such is the brief lifespan of college student prose. It's true, students may keep their essays after the semester ends, but rarely do they return to them and revise them; to do so and to submit them for another class might be considered an act of plagiarism. Portions of personal statements, however, can form professional genres ranging from cover letters to proposals. When I assign the personal statement, I intend FYC students at MC to produce a piece of professional writing that would outlive the course while putting research into rhetorical practice. Also, the importance for BW and FYC students to articulate what they are studying early in their studies, what their goals are for the future, and how they plan to get there cannot be overstressed. BW and FYC students especially benefit from writing about their educational and college experiences and critically engaging with what it means to be college students.

Throughout my teaching, I have studied how students' relations to academic writing have varied, from ease and comfort in handling "college-level" writing for some, to the dread and conflicting anxieties—a rhetoric of despair—which writing generates for others. Some professors in multiple disciplines worry that composition instructors are not teaching students how to write (Fulkerson). These instructors neglect to acknowledge that the linguistic and cultural competences of academic discourses are not students' first languages (Gee). Instructors best serve students by scaffolding academic writing with students' lived experiences and current rhetorical practices. This self-reflexive turn of writing about education at school requires BW and FYC writers to link their dispositions and autobiographies with critical thinking and analysis, and to remain grounded in a form of academic discourse.

According to the MC General Education goals for student writing at MC, the professional success and personal satisfaction of twenty-first century citizens require fluency with a broad range of modes of communication. Fluency further gets clarified as students taking ownership of language to develop a capacity for both critical analysis and considered reflection. MC students certainly do own their language when they think of it as fun or relevant, but as I have argued here, students rarely have that sense of ownership with academic discourse because, namely, it is written at—and for—school, and with little connection to students' lived experiences. Success, then, becomes

falsely reified through the language of institutionally legitimated merit. In the two cases of Janet Mullens and Sharon Romero, these students act within a self-reproducing narrative in which success is the finish line instead of a milestone on a timeline of growth; and in this way, success operates as an ideology that runs counter to the educational principles of curiosity, critical thinking, and lifelong learning (Mahle-Grisez 48).

Such a bleak outlook does not bode well for writing pedagogies that are not “economic.” However, there are ways to reinterpret successful writing, such as the Accelerated Learning Program of Peter Adams, and encouraging arguments for BW’s reinvention (Horner; Otte and Mlynarczyk). In the United States, the progressive movements of the 1960s led to affirmative action and open admission policies at many universities (Tsao). The fights for equity successfully made higher education accessible to women, ethnic minorities, and people of the working class. Nevertheless, the system of competition for institutionally legitimated credentials as a form of qualification-capital has not itself adjusted significantly. Credentials increasingly have become the mode of advancement for the meritocracy of the American social order. Historically, we can say this is how certain groups beginning early in the twentieth century were denied academic advancement because of institutionally enforced merit requirements (Brint and Karabel).

Schools reproduce the prevailing relations of production where ideologies of social mobility teach students to blame themselves if they don’t move up the ladder. Schools do, after all, provide the credentials needed to spark opportunity, to move up the ladder, but whether or not one is able to pass (maybe with merit-interest) through the corridors of power and mobility shifts to individual achievement. This begs the question of whether we are back to issues of access and equity. In the case of MC students Mullens and Romero, they determined what personal qualities appeared most meritorious to their intended audience of scholars and university professionals. As observed, not all MC students agreed with Bourdieu’s deterministic theories of stratification and domination, or his game models. Often these students waged forceful, logical debates, contributing to strong class discussions, especially as they considered agency enacted as tactics not completely determined by history and social structures. Such differences of institutional definitions of merit reflect ideologies that deserve to be critiqued in and through the genres of professional writing and are important points for discussion with BW and FYC students.

The underlying cultural imperative of competitive individualism in schools contributes to the idea that students’ failures come from within, not

from without. The same goes for success. This effect of the credential system enforced by educational institutions legitimates meritocracy. Schools qualify individuals for mobility, or at least that is the hope. And when those hopes aren't met, there is a "process of adjustment of hopes to opportunities, of aspirations to accomplishments, and in particular the work of disinvestment required in order to accept a lesser success, or a failure" (Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus* 166).

Janet Mullens and Sharon Romero each reflect this aspect of readjustment in their career choices and lives. Their writing about changes in life choices have produced qualitative inquiry for each, in addition to writing with purposes and for audiences. Both students engage their histories with the structures of institutional notions of merit, and what they want their educations to do for them in their futures. Their beliefs in meritocracy are not socially determined in the sense that they exercise no agency in their personal statements. Rather, Mullens and Romero enact beliefs in the power of education to reward agency. Such beliefs from students are sometimes founded on truth, sometimes not, but the rewards motivate them to continue to work hard.

Self-reflexive study of educational motivations challenges beliefs about schooling, offering plenty of fuel for college writers of all levels. To rhetorically craft such fieldwork of the self into genres is an aspect of the compositional process. While fieldwork may take shape as literacy narratives and memoirs, I advocate for the personal statement as another important genre for BW and FYC instructors to assign. It is a short assignment, and it could be offered as the final piece of writing for students to compose at the end of a semester when compiling portfolios of their work. A cover letter, in addition, could further supplement additional elements of professional writing for students to become familiar with and to practice for various applications for academic opportunities around their campuses, such as scholarships, grants, internships, or applications for studying abroad or graduate school. These gains, of course, arrive only after having explored the meritocratic system and the institutional rewards for those who play the game effectively.

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Notes

1. Names of students, their institutions, and their locations are pseudonyms. Information included from my biography as recounted in the article is factual.

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