

<p>Teaching Writing Through Personal Reflection: Bad Idea (adapted and abridged from the original) By Mark Bauerlein Chronicle of Higher Education, Feb. 7, 2013</p>	<p>A Faulty Narrative about Narrative: What’s Really Causing our Educational Woes By Linda Stott Curriculum Herald, Mar. 10, 2013</p>
<p>¹ David Coleman, head of the College Board, recently ignited controversy with a statement he made at a gathering of educators in Albany. Already an object of strong feelings on both sides of the education reform movement, Coleman was formerly the lead architect of the Common Core State Standards in mathematics and English language arts from kindergarten to 12th grade, standards that have since been adopted by 45 states and have the backing of the Obama administration.</p> <p>² At one point in the discussion, Coleman paused to note a problem in the teaching of writing in English classrooms: the dominance of “personal writing” and “personal opinion.” Instead of probing the benefits of getting students to express themselves, Coleman issued a flat, real-world judgment of the whole thing:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">The only problem with those two forms of writing is as you grow up in this world you realize people really don’t give a sh-- about what you feel or what you think. What they instead care about is can you make an argument with evidence, is there something verifiable behind what you’re saying or what you think or feel that you can demonstrate to me? It is rare in a working environment that someone says, “Johnson, I need a market analysis by Friday but before that I need a compelling account of your childhood.” That is rare. It is equally rare in college by the way.</p> <p>³ Since then, the statement has been repeated in <i>The Washington Post</i>, in a whimsical <i>Time Magazine</i> comment by Joel Stein, and in countless blog posts and online commentaries.</p> <p>⁴ To educators critical of Coleman, the remark seemed to identify him as estranged from real classrooms. This is the kind of statement one cannot make to 15-year-olds before starting a unit on writing an argumentative essay, or any time, for that matter, they say. Critics say it reveals Common Core as a top-down endeavor out of touch with the precious things it affects most, the kids. Why discourage them at such a fragile time, and why deprive them the chance to explore their own thoughts and feelings?</p> <p>⁵ Here’s the problem with those complaints: Coleman was right.</p> <p>⁶ In a far-reaching study published by the Association for</p>	<p>¹ Dear David Coleman,</p> <p>² You have been on a roll lately, sir. You helped create the Common Core State Standards now sweeping the nation. You’ve been named head of the College Board. And you showed just how above-the-facts you and other leaders can be when you addressed a crowd of education folks in Albany. There, you ranted against high-school teachers who assign personal narrative, reflection, or “personal opinion,” saying it’s “rare in a working environment” for a boss to expect that such writing.</p> <p>³ Pundits, critics, scholars, and teachers have since split into camps defending and attacking you for the statement. Some of your defenders make sensible points about the need for students to learn to read closely and analyze the arguments and texts of others, contending that they’re not learning to do so in high school. That much is true, and it’s true that when they come to college armed only with personal reflection and personal opinion, they suffer greatly for having been poorly prepared. On that point, we stand shoulder-to-shoulder, sir.</p> <p>⁴ However, that’s not the fault of the personal narrative assignment. There’s nothing wrong with personal narrative writing, and, in fact, your first sign of trouble is that you seem utterly unaware how common personal writing really is in every kind of workplace. Have you truly missed the wave of books, workshops, and training seminars dedicated to developing storytelling skills in political and business leaders because storytelling is widely seen as a key skill in the leader arsenal? (One book I see on Amazon.com quotes psychologist Howard Gardner: “Every great leader is a great storyteller.”) The stories in these cases aren’t tales about hobbits or princesses – they’re personal narratives, meant to communicate personal visions and build rapport with those they lead.</p> <p>⁵ Want a specific example? Let’s start at the top: Warren Buffett, no slouch in the field of business – he’s the third-richest person on the planet, with the GDP of a small nation – is also a very good writer, with letters to shareholders that are read around the world by people with no connection to his company because he explains key economic realities in engaging and clear ways. He writes that stuff so well that when the U.S. Securities and Exchange</p>

Literary Scholars, Critics, and Writers in 2010, a team led by Sandra Stotsky surveyed high-school English classes and found that the assignments students completed leaned more toward personal response and historical context than they did toward “close, analytical reading” of the texts themselves. For instance, a paper on *To Kill a Mockingbird* would ask students either to use their personal experience to reflect on the novel or to find out something about Jim Crow, not discuss plot, language, or character. Noting the close relation between analytical reading modes and college readiness, Stotsky concluded that the “stress on personal experience or historical context may be contributing to high remediation rates in postsecondary English and reading courses.”

7 In a research report from 2006 entitled *Reading Between the Lines: What the ACT Reveals about College Readiness in Reading*, ACT isolated the clearest differentiator of students who start higher education “college ready” in reading and those who do not. That differentiator is “proficiency in understanding complex texts.” The finding indicates why personal-response assignments in high school are counterproductive: Complex texts involve formal, verbal, and structural elements that personal responses easily ignore. They involve ambiguous and dense language, intricate structure, ironies, remote settings, and the like.

8 These are the characteristics of college-level readings, and they are appreciated not by “How does this text bear upon your experience?” exercises, but by close reading summaries and by “Arguespeak”—Gerald Graff’s term for statements like “Critic X asserts that Twain presents Jim as the moral conscience of the novel, but Critic Y argues that Twain’s presentation falls apart in the final chapters when Jim becomes a pawn in Tom Sawyer’s games. Both sides err, for. ...”

9 Coleman’s harsh remark was justified, and it had to be offered bluntly because of the stubborn commitment many educators have to personal-response writing. When they encourage 15-year-olds to explore their feelings, memories and identities, they turn the text into a pretext for self-discovery—precisely the opposite of what students will have to do after high school. Instead of summarizing and arguing over what the text says, they examine how it relates to them. Does this produce more thoughtful, informed graduates, capable of critical thinking? Or does it encourage narcissism, the belief that “YOU are the measure of all things”?

Commission decided it needed a “plain English handbook” for prospectus writers, it recruited him to write the Foreword. Part of Buffett’s trick is personal writing: He uses narrative; he talks about family; and he connects all that stuff, skillfully, to his subject matter. We can see how it relates to us because he shows us how it relates to him.

6 The pattern holds up across the board. Politicians tell stories so often (“As I was helping out at the local soup kitchen the other day, Beth Davis of Lafayette said to me...”) that you can make a drinking game out of it during campaign season. Even scientists do it. A lot. World-class brain Stephen Hawking once drew on personal narrative in his most famous scientific paper, published in 1974 in *Physics Review D*. Hawking was aware his fellow scientists would laugh at his discovery that black holes can have radiation. So he told a story about how the math kept showing that the radiation had to be there. Eventually, unable to make the result go away, Hawking had to shrug and accept it. The story won over cynics—and appears in the middle of a scholarly journal known mostly for equations.

7 So, no, Mr. Coleman, personal writing is a fine thing to teach. The problem is that too many high schools are limiting writing assignments to *only* personal responses. While personal writing is fine, teaching nothing else is like deciding that tomatoes are healthy so we should only ever eat tomatoes. A developing human needs more variety than that. Students need to learn analysis-based writing, too.

8 So why aren’t they? The truth is that schools are teaching personal response exclusively because that’s what all of the new high-stakes exams are encouraging them to do. The writing exams expect personal response, and the pressure on teachers to get results is immense. The resulting tunnel-vision is lamentable, but it’s also predictable.

9 To correct this problem, we need to find the bastards responsible for high-stakes testing and make sure they never have anything to do with education again. From what I’ve heard, one of the leaders in the new national curriculum and assessment movement is a fellow named ... um, “David Coleman.” You should look him up, sir, and give him a piece of our mind.

10 In solidarity,

11 Linda Stott