This paper considers the use of a simple assignment, the personal narrative, in teaching students the discursive issues involved in doing academic history. Focusing on autobiography, I present the results of a survey of Canadian university students into their experiences with writing personal histories. Specifically, the survey asked students to think about three major epistemological issues in doing history: truth and subjectivity, problems of memory, and selectivity. Exemplary excerpts from three students’ portfolios show the kind of work they produced. From the results, the paper argues that university history classes—not just writing courses—should employ personal history as a first assignment to allow students to work as historians and encounter the issues historians regularly face when constructing accounts of the past.

Personal writing comes in many forms, and it may at first glance seem to hold little value for teaching the work of the historian in the university setting. The expectations and characteristics of university writing differ depending on the academic field in question, raising further difficulties. This article shows, however, that personal writing and academic writing might be congruent in one way. Personal narrative can be used as a starting point to help students understand the discursive pressures of work in one particular field: history.

The value of using personal writing—a typical expressivist writing assignment—to teach students about historical work may not be readily apparent. The emphasis of expressivist pedagogy on voice and personal experience has been criticized by social constructivists on the grounds that it does not help writers “master the accepted practices of a discourse community” (Fishman and McCarthy 647). David Bartholomae, a proponent of this view, argued that students need to be taught the discourses of academic writing (63). He says student writers must be “aware of the forces at play in the production of knowledge” (66)—personal writing may avoid such questions, he argues. Without this attention to discourse, he says, students do not learn how to combat the power inherent in those discourses (64). Stephen Fishman and Lucille McCarthy describe social constructivist writing pedagogy as a concern for an apparent neglect for “academically valued ways of thinking” and “ignoring the social settings of specified skills and bodies of knowledge” (648). At first glance, the expressivist focus on the personal seems at odds with the social constructionist goal of “introducing
students systematically to the rules of a disciplinary language that would otherwise be inaccessible to them” (Fishman and McCarthy 654). Candace Spigelman describes this as contrary to “expressive rhetoric’s insistence on students’ private voices, visions, and ultimate authority over their texts . . . Such an approach, they say, overemphasizes the power of personal insight and ignores the ways that knowledge is constructed socially” (70). Taken together, these arguments suggest that personal writing blinds the student writer to the discursive production of meaning and convinces the student writer that all meaning comes from within.

However, another strain of thinking has shown that the discursive production of meaning is best taught, particularly in history, through the emphasis on ‘doing history,’ not simply reading about history (VanSledright 1092). Personal writing, also called autobiography, life writing, or memoir, is a form of this ‘doing history.’ Personal writing is defined by Spigelman as “the ways in which writers make sense of their lives by organizing their experience into first-person stories” (65–66).

In the ‘doing history’ pedagogy, students are encouraged to bring the personal to their work to encourage engagement. As Deborah Vess argues, “Techniques which encourage active learning will better convey a sense of history as a vivid, exciting subject in which the past continues to speak through those who encounter it in the present” (46). A number of scholars have reported successful active learning classroom projects such as classroom histories (see Wallace and Beidler), family histories (see Culbert; Jeffrey), local histories (see Underwood; Candeloro), creative historical fiction (see Vess) and oral histories (see Long; Whitman). These studies found that through doing history students learned epistemological foundations of historical work. They understood historical generalizations, grappled with missing evidence and conflicting perspectives, and came to appreciate the preservation of history.

All of these active classroom projects required students not to receive historical wisdom from academic historians, but to understand the problems that those historians deal with every day in the construction of historical accounts. These approaches position history “not just there, awaiting the researcher’s discovery . . . history has no existence before it is written” (Howell and Prevenier 1). Rather than seeing history as a collection of facts or a work of “voiceless men and women in textbooks” (Whitman 470), students who do historical work learn that history is a “confrontation between the investigator and the evidence” (McClymer and Moynihan 361). These projects do what Bruce VanSledright argues many history teachers typically do not do, which is illuminating the “interpretive paradox inherent in the practice of history itself” (1091). In theory, these kinds of ‘doing history’ approaches help students become immediately aware of the inherent constructedness—not just the factual excavation involved in historical work.

In the study of teaching history, however, there has been no research into using autobiography, life writing, and memoir as a way for university students
to work as historians and, at the same time, encounter and reconcile history's epistemological realities. In his examination of personal writing’s value, Stuart Green argues that it can help develop students’ understanding of the “epistemological assumptions that inform its discursive practices” (138). In this light, perhaps writing teachers proper have simply not considered these kinds of personal writing as history at all, reflecting an earlier perspective of life writing, autobiography, and memoir as on or beyond the boundary of the historical field. Certainly academic historians have been skeptical of personal narrative as a historical source for reasons described later in this paper. Yet student responses in this paper suggest that personal narrative of this sort may help achieve the pedagogical goals set out by John Wallace and Paul Beidler to help history students

realize the nature of historical inquiry[,] . . . appreciate the difficulties inherent in the reconstruction and interpretation of past events[,] . . . approach historical material with the healthy skepticism, sensitivity to uncertainty and discrepancy[,] . . . and [question the] objectivity of the properly trained historian. (24)

Personal writing also represents a relevant assignment for university history students because it is narrative, a form that has always been central to historical writing. Academic history writing today, despite shifts towards the theoretical and abstract, still includes a great deal of story-telling. While autobiography or memoir has always been seen as “not very respectable” in the field (Popkin 50), personal histories are growing in status (Caine 69). In writing personal histories, students produce a form that has become a useful source for academic historians. The personal narrative is also a reflection of ‘history from below’ and ‘social history’ approaches that gained popularity over the past five decades (Caine 70; Howell and Prevener 14–16, 110). Carl Becker praises this kind of “living history” as the “history that does work in the world, the history that influences the course of history . . . that pattern of remembered events, whether true or false, that enlarges and enriches the collective present, the specious present of Mr. Everyman” (21). Personal narrative is distinctly within the academic history field today.

Personal writing can thus be respectably situated within academic history courses as an assignment. Assignments that require students to engage in this writing represent a way for “students to enter the academic conversation by bringing their own ‘extratextual knowledge’” (Spigelman 71). Spigelman goes so far as to say that personal writing “can accomplish serious scholarly work” (64). Furthermore, Wallace and Biedler contend that “personal experience of students may provide a useful basis for teaching the more elusive attributes of the art of historical inquiry” (30).

Personal history writing draws on students’ creative abilities in telling detailed stories with precision and bringing the past to life. In an assessment of creative writing more broadly as a writing tool in the history discipline,
Deborah Vess says it is “one way for students to realize that history is a discipline which is filtered through the lens of the present, and that each of them, as Carl Becker once said, must be their ‘own historian’” (52). Furthermore, “Creative writing, which demands personal interaction with material and an inherently interpretive and critical approach, is often more successful in developing autonomous thought and the ability critically to evaluate sources” (Vess 46). Vess’s ideas follow from Becker’s notion that history is always a “story that employs all the devices of literary art” (Winks 17), a point often forgotten in the academic writing world of arguments and assertions. But as Ellen Somekawa and Elizabeth Smith have noted, this creative aspect of history writing is not typically taught to students; instead, teachers emphasize how to make inferences from evidence and how to cite evidence (152). The personal and its creativity are often left by the wayside. To introduce this missing element to history courses, the personal history assignment can help students understand this form both as historical evidence and as a project that can introduce them to the constructed discourse of academic history.

**The Survey**

To connect the personal narrative assignment to broader discussions of academic history discourse, I engaged students through a short survey. The survey results present a look into the actual experience of students encountering the discourse of the academic history field. The voluntary, anonymous survey asked three questions corresponding to three key epistemological concerns in historical scholarship: truth and subjectivity, problems of memory, and selectivity. Recently, scholars of historiography have discussed a number of these at times contested and controversial concerns. Students who have an uncontested view of history—seeing history as a series of facts to be learned from others as is still often the case today (Díaz et al. 1218)—are students who have not had an opportunity to encounter or struggle with them.

Below, I describe the three concerns and present representative student writers’ comments about each. Responses show that, in answering these questions after writing personal histories, students can encounter these major pressures of doing historical work. In some ways, students had already dealt with key academic historical research and writing problems before being prompted by the questions. This suggests that personal history assignments can serve as a useful beginning assignment in the history classroom to raise students’ awareness of epistemological challenges of doing history.

The students who responded to the survey for this study took a course that was modeled upon a course for beginning writers taught by Guy Allen at the University of Toronto Mississauga (see Allen, “‘Good-Enough’”; “Language”). The course encourages students to write non-fiction first-person narratives based on their experiences and observations, positions the instructor as an editor or supporting other, not as a judge, and has a clearly defined and rigorously maintained course frame (Allen, “‘Good-Enough’” 148). Students
wrote seven personal narratives (two to four pages in length) over twelve weeks on a number of themes (childhood, relationship, job, family) with regular revision based upon grammar and style lessons (eliminating wordiness, passive voice, clichés, and vague pronouns; employing strong verbs and nouns, active voice, parallelism, sentence length variation, rhythm, and pacing). Students shared their work with classmates in both one-on-one and group peer-editing sessions to encourage the understanding of audience reception in the editing process (additionally, each student met with me for two one-on-one editing sessions during the term). Students did not, however, receive grades on their work during the term. Instead, students had the opportunity to edit work until final submission day, when students e-mailed in their completed portfolios (worth 70% of the final grade). I examined how well students incorporated the grammar and style lessons from lectures into their writing and how well their work matched the peer model readings. Students did not read any writing by academic historians, only the best personal narratives written by previous students in the Professional Writing & Communication program at the University of Toronto Mississauga. Allen and students in the program have collected the best stories and published them in course textbooks (see Allen, Make It New; also see earlier collection: Allen, No More Masterpieces). As Allen has observed in his courses, students working in this method develop honest, subjective, first-person narrative voices, using direct experience for content, and employing an appropriate style for the subject (“‘Good-Enough’” 144). While students were instructed to tell stories about their own lives, the course did not include any discussion of history, historiography, or academic writing.

In his classes, Allen reported “students making connections. They make these connections—between inner world and outer world, between self and other, between past and present” (150). Rather than seeing students as inward-looking, Allen found that students “use narratives to make links between their inner and outer worlds . . . and links between the academic and the personal” (159). The students’ survey responses show the specific nature of those links.

At the end of three separate sections of the course (2009–2010), I asked students to complete the voluntary emailed exit survey after grades were submitted. Thirty-eight of 89 students answered the survey questions. The responses reveal how they dealt with the problems historians typically encounter. These answers provide further evidence for the assertion that rather than being close-minded or inward-looking, personal writing can connect students with discursive issues in an academic field.

The following sections include a short gloss on each of the three historical problems under consideration,2 the questions asked, and a representative selection of students’ answers. As students who were surveyed were promised anonymity, I have labelled answers only by an “S” for student and a unique number that represents each.
Student Commentaries Theme #1: Truth and Subjectivity

While truth has always been a central issue in all academic work, particularly in its relationship with fact-finding, historiography of the past half century or so has raised questions about the subjectivity of the historian and the constructed nature of historical accounts. In his famous book What is History, E.H. Carr spurred great debate when he questioned the notion of objective truth about the past, arguing that history is one’s subjective interpretation (8). Barbara Tuchman, although contrary to Carr in many ways, agreed, saying there “is no such thing as a neutral or purely objective historian” (29). Philosopher of history Mark Day notes that “all history is constructed in some sense—we can never really ‘test’ the facts we use against the ‘reality’ of the past by some direct access to the past” (205).

At Indiana University, researchers of the History Learning Project found that students thought that facts “speak by themselves, and thus ‘The Story’ of the past has an objective quality in which ‘truth’ is found. They believe that their job in history courses is to regurgitate the dates and events they have memorized” (Díaz et al. 1213). On the contrary, the researchers argued, students

must accept that sources are created by human beings and are as complicated as life itself . . . They may be asked . . . about the subjective perspectives that particular individuals brought to their experience. For students expecting a different kind of discussion this may seem like a walk into a confusing twilight zone. (1214)

In their research about students doing history, Somekawa and Smith argue further that this inherent subjectivity must be foregrounded so that “personal and limited perspectives, the institutional and social contexts in which we labor to produce history, and our political agendas for writing what we write would all become appropriate subjects for examination in our work” (158). Furthermore, they note that people must understand that “history does not portray a universal, objective truth about the past” (159). Autobiography has been a key genre in this truth debate, with some historians cautioning against giving too much weight to subjective accounts of the past (Howell and Prevenier 21). Caine and Carr counter that all historical writing, even if not explicitly personal, contains the subjectivity of the author (Caine 67; Carr 8).

Stemming from this short gloss on truth and objectivity in historical writing, the survey asked students to reflect on this question: Do you think your stories represent the truth of what actually happened? As the course was explicitly positioned as a non-fiction writing class, I expected many students would provide an uncritical affirmation. Indeed, a few students were certain their stories represented the truth:

S1: All the stories I wrote were true and actually happened.
S2: I think most of my stories told a fair representation of what happened.

S32: I feel that my stories conveyed the highest amount of truth. When I shared the stories with my family, they were surprised at how “real” I was being.

However, the majority of students responded with a more critical eye, clearly confronting the dilemma of their own subjectivity and truth of their personal histories. A number of students admitted—perhaps surprisingly given the non-fiction nature of the writing assignments—that their work may not be true, even if they felt they captured the story accurately. In particular, they recognized the bias of witness evidence:

S3: I do not think they represent the truth. I’m sure that the other “characters” in my stories would see it differently.

S4: In terms of dialogue, there could be many variations from what the portrayed character actually said. I believe that my characters would agree with the way events panned out, but they might argue that I made them appear a bit more extreme than they actually acted (or are willing to admit).

S8: Yes, I feel that my stories represent the truth of what happened, from my perspective. I mean, in a way, I feel like there is no such thing as “truth” because everyone sees things in a different way.

S9: I believe other characters in my stories must remember the events differently. There is no objective truth to the stories, only a subjective account.

S16: They are all told from my perspective, so subtleties of my dictionary reveal my interpretation of events. Had they been told from another person’s perspective, maybe this person would remember different details or have perceived certain comments/actions differently.

These students were not questioning that their narratives did not attempt to correspond to the truth. However, they were willing to accept that witness testimony—their own testimony of history—may not be completely representative. They acknowledge that other witnesses to those events may have seen the situations somewhat differently and that incorporating those perspectives into the writing could fill in gaps or provide a broader view of what happened. Alternative viewpoints required to corroborate history were not problematic for these students despite their focus on expressing their own experiences of key moments in their lives.

This understanding is fundamental to the historian’s work. Students who experienced this kind of dilemma in answering the question were forced to
directly confront truth and subjectivity. In an academic history course, this realization could provide an opportunity or way in to discuss this major issue from the perspective of academic historians. This awareness is helpful whether one tells one’s own history or researches and writes the histories of others.

The second set of responses in this theme shows that these writers do not see themselves as individuals disconnected from communities and audiences; neither are they attempting to find some essentialist meaning about their lives as they look within. Instead the students suggest an awareness of the nature of truth in historical retelling and their own position in relationships with others—audiences—as producers of meaning.

**Student Commentaries Theme #2: Problems of Memory**

Another major epistemological concern of academic historians is the issue of memory, specifically the reliability and distortions of individual memory found in personal narrative. Historians of the distant past thought they could “re[-]enter that mental universe and so recover the presence of those times” while today’s historians are “suspicious of the distortions of memory, and they are watchful of the transference of their own memories onto the histories that they would write” (Hutton 535).

This concern for memory has caused historians to caution readers about the authenticity of testimony that comes from popular autobiographies. Testimony can be flawed, and “the ‘truth’ of these accounts lies as much in how the author chooses to tell them as it does in the historically verifiable ‘past’” (Crane 21–22). Historian Rene Remond said that historians know “from experience the precariousness of recollection, the unreliability of first-person testimony” (qtd. in Popkin, *History* 62). Furthermore, as individual recollection, autobiography often includes evidence that just cannot be verified at all (Popkin, “Holocaust” 50). As such, academic historians have tended not to accept the “primacy of individual voices” (Caine 79). With this in mind, academic historians typically choose evidence that is available to the public and thus verifiable to supplement and confirm individual memory (Popkin, *History* 50).

Nonetheless, historians have come to appreciate *personal* narrative accounts even if they cannot be verified. Barbara Caine notes that individual voices can be valuable to “illustrate the experiences of a whole group” (80). In a specific example, Jeremy Popkin shows the importance of individual testimony in constructing greater accounts of the Holocaust (“Holocaust” 51). Crane similarly argues that “personal memory acquired from studying, thinking and learning is ultimately as much a ‘source’ of historical writing as the official sources, the artifacts and documents which historians use in research” (21).

To prompt students to think about the historian’s concern for memory, the survey asked for responses to this question: *Did you have any problems remembering the details of your stories?* As with the first question, I expected
some students would say no, particularly considering many of their narratives were about events that had happened recently. Surprisingly, only one respondent was relatively assured, saying “I had almost no difficulties remembering details.” The rest of the students expressed varying degrees of concern. In the following responses, note in particular the recognition of individual memory and perspective:

S4: Yes, it was challenging to remember certain details because a lot of the stories took place when I was a lot younger.

S8: I found for some of my stories, I had a hard time remembering details, especially the one about childhood because it was so long ago.

S10: I think the memories we make are very individual though, so everybody would have a different interpretation of an event that took place. After thinking about it for so long, you form things in your brain, and it’s hard to tell yourself whether that really happened, or if it’s something you just thought up.

S21: People have selective memory, and some only remember certain aspects of a story, while others remember different aspects. However, I accurately described each story from my own perspective with my own selective memory.

Furthermore, in working like a historian—without having been told how historians work—many students said they got around memory problems by seeking out other sources, essentially trying to match their recollections with other people’s memories and even documentary evidence from the events:

S6: For one story, I asked my sister what exactly John said because I knew she would read it and I wanted to get the dialogue right to satisfy her.

S11: I asked Mom about some details of the physical appearances and searched for pictures that were taken at that time.

S20: To help me remember I went through some family albums and talked to my family about how certain people looked at certain times. I also asked my parents if the character that I wrote about sounded like that person.

S26: Thankfully, I’ve kept journals since elementary school and I always keep my journals once they’re filled. I was able to flip through them to remember certain events and better understand my emotional state at the time.

S32: For some of the events in my stories, I looked back at photo albums taken the day they occurred, just to refresh my memory.
Far from being certain that their personal experience was narrated accurately from memory, these students expressed a subtle doubt about what they had recollected. Like academic historians working with witnesses, they felt somewhat worried that perhaps those memories were not up to par. They understood that memories fade, and they showed the same skepticism as the historian for the ability of witness testimony to tell the complete story, even though it was their own. And just like the academic historian, they turned to other evidence in an attempt to ensure the stories corresponded to the truth. With this second question being asked after the writing of these personal histories, students were in a good position to reflect on memory concerns—this was not some abstract problem discussed by historians distanced from the students’ world. On the contrary, students had directly experienced the problems of memory.

**Student Commentaries Theme #3: Selectivity**

A third major issue in doing history is the question of selection. What should historians include and exclude? How might the audience react to those inclusions and exclusions? Carr also discussed selectivity, arguing that history is “a process of selection in terms of historical significance” (105). This was not passing judgement on historians; Carr wrote that the “historian is necessarily selective. The belief in a hard core of historical facts existing objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historian is a preposterous fallacy” (12). The survival of certain documents and the preservation of some material over others emphasizes certain events in the historical record—the stories of history reflect the evidence that survives and was chosen to survive (Day 9; Carr 18).

Stuart Greene argues that personal writing illuminates this selectivity problem. Personal writing provides students with “opportunities to understand the extent to which the processes of selecting, arranging, and sequencing ideas are intimately related to the theoretical assumptions that guide one’s thinking” (95). Naturally, “to narrate” and “to choose” are synonyms. To write a narrative—even a personal narrative—is to determine what details matter and what do not, what needs emphasis and what does not, and what deserves direct observation and what requires secondary sources. In his work on student family history projects, David Culbert notes that students who wrote family histories sometimes did not want to tell readers the bad things, a practical example of selectivity (16).

The next survey question dealt with the problems of selection, both as historian and as historical witness: *Were there any events or incidents that you avoided writing about?* Responses show that some things were off-limits in personal histories:

S6: I altered one story to remove the part where someone in the story hurt me and let me down because I knew that person was going to read the story.
S8: There were some incidences that I tried to avoid writing about simply because they were too personal to be shared with anyone.

S26: I had a lot of difficulty with the last story, because it was about a relationship between a man and a woman. My home environment has always been abusive and I have not witnessed many loving relationships between men and women. I was unable to really write about the incidences I've witnessed because they're still too emotionally fresh. I know they say writing can be healing, but personal writing can also open up wounds that some would rather stay closed.

S30: There were some very personal things I did want to write about. But when I discussed it with my father (a second opinion) I decided against it. Some things are meant to be private I guess.

S33: I mainly avoided them because they were just too personal or traumatizing.

This set of responses shows students’ encountering problems about publicizing the private, revealing the personal to the public. The students showed concern in the selection of what to choose to write about or include, reflecting on the possible judgements of audiences. Students recognized that telling one’s history involves an act of selection at the very heart of the project and that such selection can hurt those involved. In this assignment, students were not simply expressing themselves freely and wholly, despite the assumed freedom found in personal writing. These experiences should help students develop sensitivity that historians have for documenting the witness testimony of others, such as Holocaust survivors or other survivors of trauma. This line of questioning also raised the students’ consciousness of the self-censoring of historical witnesses.

**Excerpts from Personal Histories**

The students encountered these abstract concerns in doing history, but in the end, what kind and quality of history writing did this assignment, in the type of class described above, produce? Examples from the personal narratives of three students show two main characteristics: clear, concise, detailed writing at the sentence level and the illumination of interesting eyewitness experiences of significant events—the characteristics of all good academic history. The stories are cultural and social histories that present groups, arts, and events from the perspective of ordinary people.

In one poignant story, Ariana Wardak writes about growing up in Kabul, Afghanistan. Depicting the factional strife of the Mujahideen, Wardak describes a moment in 1994 when a soldier enters an underground storage room where her family had taken refuge during bombings:
Uncle Amaan holds the doorknob, twists it, pushes the door in and beckons us in. We hurry inside. Darkness fills the room except for the sunlight shimmering inside from a window. Mother walks towards the switchboard, flicks a switch, and light fills the room. Everyone looks around, up, and down. Spider-webs cover the four corners and a fireplace lies untouched in the other end of the room. Granny unfolds her shawl, dusts the ground with it, folds the shawl, places it on the ground, and we sit on it. Mother wraps her arms around me. Uncle Amaan’s chest flares, his eyes turn red as he sits on the far corner of the shawl besides Granny.

A tall Mujahid with a long beard and bulgy eyes walks in and raises his rifle in the air. His eyes dart from one face to another.

“We are here for the Mujahideen. So just let us do our thing and we’ll spare you all!” he says.

Uncle Amaan stands up and shouts, “You just killed an innocent woman, you little piece of shit! Who are you to spare our lives? Allah gave us life and He will be the one to take it.”

“So you are not afraid to die?” the Mujahid says and stomps towards Uncle Amaan. He fixes Uncle Amaan a hard glare and places the end of his rifle on Uncle Amaan’s chest. Granny mutters panicked prayers, and she rolls her turquoise prayer beads and tears moisten her wrinkled face. My stomach revolts, my lips purse, I let out a whimper, and cup my mouth with my hands. Mother gets up, races towards the Mujahid, kneels down and holds his thigh.

“For Allah’s sake, don’t kill him. He is crazy. He doesn’t know what he is talking about,” she cries. The Mujahid looks down at Mother, then at Uncle Amaan, holds his rifle with both hands, puts it down, and glares at everyone in the room. The man raises his rifle again.

“Does anybody else have a problem with what we are doing? ‘Cause if you do, I’d be happy to blow your brains out!” the Mujahid says and walks out.

Wardak’s personal narrative brings us directly into the action, documenting from the ground the human side of war. Academic historians aspire to this level of detail and immediacy. Understanding this testimony as historical source may broaden the student’s scope in retelling past events. Accessing the experience of regular people, as Wardak’s story does, may encourage student historians to go beyond official documents and artifacts. The focus on only one scene in personal narrative also demands attention to necessary selection on the historian’s part: when to begin and end, what details of place, gesture, and clothing to include, and how to portray those participants accurately. If the personal narrative assignment is positioned as ‘history’ by the instructor, the student should quickly understand the truth questions raised in doing history.

With a long, colourful history, the cultural practices of Trinidadian society serve as fruitful material for Matthew Stollmeyer’s tale of his experience at Carnival, an outdoor festival of dancing and music on the island:

Perfectly synchronized metallic percussion resonated from the shiny silver drums and pans. The player’s shoulders, arms and wrists moved in perfect
time, resulting in crisp ringing throughout the parade. Chaos followed. Couples everywhere outdanced each other with excessive gyrations and sexual expressions.

One couple in particular amused me. The man supported his body with his hands on the floor, resembling a failed limbo dancer. Four green straps sprouted from his chest piece; two of them wrapped around his shoulders while the other two wrapped around his lower back. The woman blocking the view of his pants practically sat on him. She wore a bikini costume adorned with stringed beads looping down her legs. His pelvis followed her waist regardless of how quickly she moved it.

I looked towards a Snow Cone vendor as he packed crushed ice into cups in time with the steelpan. With one pang he scooped ice, after another two he smacked it into the Styrofoam cup.

“Ahh ha, check de man fall!” Nicholas said, pointing at the couple. The man lay face up on the ground, completely starfished. The girl stooped above him clutching her belly in laughter. An exhausted smile came over his face as another partier pulled him up.

The band advanced, people danced while walking, chippin’ down the road. Others jumped forward, hands bobbing in the air while shouting along to the ever-present calypso.

In this excerpt, Stollmeyer presents his culture through a detailed scene. He includes the language of his friend as his friend actually sounds. The details of body movements and expressions, of dancing couples, and of a Snow Cone vender bring this scene to life for readers. Readers become immersed in the sounds and sights of the moment. The focused, detailed writing resembles the best of historical work that attempts to describe a cultural tradition. In this way, the personal narrative assignment allows the student to work within the realm of cultural history. While his story is obviously personal, the event itself represents group experience; the assignment connects the personal with the communal. Indeed, it may show the history student how to ‘access’ cultural history through witness testimony. Finally, Nishkruti Munshi describes the confusion of waiting with thousands of people in the Calgary, Alberta airport after her plane was diverted and grounded on the day of the September 11 terrorist attacks:

> People occupy different corners and personalize little patches of the blue carpet with their belongings that ooze out of their stuffed carry-on luggage.

> Airport officials appear from nowhere. They run about frantically in their ironed suits and polished shoes while they talk into hand held radios. At precise intervals, a recorder recites a message through the PA system, “Attention passengers, you are advised to be with your luggage at all times. Unattended luggage will be confiscated and destroyed.”

> Armed men close in on the terminal. Stress swallows the stagnant air. I feel scared. A tall, stiff man with a megaphone tears through the crowd. A black wire creeps down his ear and disappears into his nape. The megaphone screeches into the air. The crowd goes quiet. The man bellows though the loudspeaker:
“The reason everyone is gathered here today . . . pause . . . is that a terrorist attack . . . pause . . . has taken place in the United States of America.”

Murmurs ruffle through the crowd.

“The World Trade Centre collapsed. Two United Airlines flights crashed into the twin towers. All flights going into the US are diverted. Airports in the US are closed. Outgoing flights from Canada are suspended . . . until further notice.”

A crescendo of confused gasps escapes from the swarm and tears instantly dribble down terrified eyes and people shrink to the floor and muffled wails reverberate in the dense air. Time pauses. I grab my Mummy’s hand, close my eyes and think about my lost luggage, the people lost here at Calgary, and the lives lost in New York.

Munshi’s tale shows the wide effect of the attack, connecting her personal history with the events in New York. It resembles oral history accounts of the attacks collected by the official 9/11 memorial. Just as greater understanding of the Holocaust was formed through the collection of individual stories, Munshi contributes her own individual testimony to a much larger cultural transnational experience. In choosing to tell this kind of personal narrative, the student may better recognize the role and appropriateness of participant histories in the retellings of larger events. As a result, the student broadens his or her perspective on the value of such specific, detailed testimony to a greater historical project.

All three stories show the best of historical storytelling, of important events and interesting cultures, produced in a beginner’s writing course—not a history course—in a university environment.

Conclusion

The teaching approach outlined in this article represents a simple starting point for linking personal history writing to the epistemological issues of doing academic historical work. The survey answers show students wrestling with the power and responsibility inherent in the process of social construction of the past. This reflects Spigelman’s observation that in personal writing students discover “the ways in which experiential evidence necessarily destabilizes certainty, the ways in which stories encourage contradiction and inconsistency and offer narrative layerings, all open to interpretation” (75). Most students showed a concern or care for truth even if they could not ultimately meet that high standard.

The survey results suggest that personal narrative and an ensuing discussion of students’ work as historians can be useful not just as an assignment in the writing classroom but also as a beginning assignment in university history classes to engage students in understanding academic history’s challenges. In constructing non-fiction narratives about their own lives—a respectable form in academic history today—they get to do what historians do: pull together historical details into coherent accounts. Students become producers, not just consumers, of history. Perhaps their singular drive to produce
interesting, readable stories that they care about leads to the compelling, detailed historical narratives reprinted above.

As the survey comments suggest, personal experience writing need not produce an insular student writer unaware of the greater issues historians face. It can be employed to understand the discursive challenges of writing academic history, moving students away from seeing history as simply a collection of uncontested facts. Students reflected on possible audience reactions and the concepts of truth without reading secondary sources or receiving training in historiography. Personal narrative can thus accomplish goals of both expressivist and social constructivist pedagogies for the beginning history student: engaging students in writing—and writing history—while exposing them to the discursive production of knowledge. Personal narrative may also find a useful place, introducing students to other concepts, in other disciplines such as sociology, the hard sciences, and political science, among others.

The results of research into this specific form of the ‘doing history’ approach to history teaching reflect the importance of personalization to students’ understanding of historical work and its challenges. Roger Long felt the need to add the personal dimension to his history courses—in his case oral history (308). However, these kinds of projects can be time-consuming, as Kirk Jeffrey recalls about his students’ family history projects (367). Family history or local history projects can be more difficult to complete in one term for beginning history students than writing a traditional term paper based on secondary sources easily found on library shelves. The use of personal narrative of the sort described in this article, however, does not place unreasonable work demands on students in a single term. Students do not have to spend a great deal of time researching—the content is all in their heads—but they may choose to consult with others, as students in these classes did. The personal history assignment can provide students with “occasions to develop the thinking skills historians value through writing” (Greene 95). Of course, this assignment would not be the only part of a history course—it would only be the beginning. After writing the personal narrative, students may be assigned to visit local archives and research and write local history or tackle oral history projects. The University of Toronto Mississauga Professional Writing and Communication program asks students in a course called Writing History to produce local and personal histories, which have been published in two collections used as course textbooks (see Procter; Cunanan et al.). Later on, students may then be ready to deal with the secondary literature of the masterpiece academic historians and connect that material to their personal work, more fully able to relate from personal experience.

Yet traditional methods still reign in history courses. Many teachers assign argumentative and expository term papers based upon secondary sources in their attempt to help students understand the academic history discourse. They discuss truth and subjectivity, memory, and selectivity in terms of the
work of academic ‘others.’ As a result, students may disengage. They do not get to experience the discourse from inside it as a practitioner—they work at a distance from secondary sources. Thousands of undergraduates are enrolled in history courses but rarely do they get to write accounts of history as the students in my study did. Rarely do they get to experience being a historian (they may not even realize this personal history is indeed legitimate historical work). Wallace and Beidler call for attention to that “experiential base” that allows history students to develop “sensitivity to discrepancy, awareness of uncertainty and disagreement and their potential sources, and the development of a healthy skepticism are intellectual attributes necessary in any field of scholarly inquiry” (29). The personal history assignment is clearly not antithesis to that goal.

On the other side of the equation, instructors in university history classes can introduce this assignment to their classes to introduce students to some of the major concerns of the field before they encounter them in textbooks. They can connect those abstract ideas to their personal experiences. Instructors may find students more willing to take on primary research projects with this experience behind them. As well, the assignment does not add a significant grading burden on the history teacher. It efficiently works on a number of levels—the practical and the abstract—and provides a chance for students to write.

These results reflects the idea that, as Richard Marius and Mel Page argue, “Historians must always put something of themselves into the stories they tell; never are they empty vessels through which the records of the past spew forth as if they were an untouched truth about the past” (6). When given a chance to put themselves into this work, they come to understand the historian’s experience of subjectivity, the issues of truth, the problems of memory, and the power of selection.

Both personal writing pedagogy and the ‘doing history’ strain of historical pedagogy position students as active creators of meaning, and students’ own experiences, whether as individual writer or historian, are valued. Adding this ‘doing history’ assignment and questions to the history classroom can, in Bruce Horner’s terms, educate students about “material, social, and historical operating not only within and outside the classroom, but also, and more significantly, within as well as outside student consciousness” (513). As the survey answers show, most students can come to understand these issues even in writing their own personal histories. Academic historians understand these epistemological issues because they get to express their own ideas and experiences through this process of constructing works of history; beginning students of history should be encouraged to do the same.

Notes

1. I see discourse as the often unseen communicative pressures or structures that condition ways of thinking and acting in a given social domain (see

2. The descriptions of each section are naturally summary in nature. These summaries exist to suggest generally each epistemological before the presentation of student comments.

3. Students gave permission for their work to be reprinted here. The stories were written in other sections of the course that were not part of the anonymous survey. The full stories were significantly longer than these excerpts.

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**Works Cited**


