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Crafting Biographical Sketches In Business Classes

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Abstract

When students are asked to introduce themselves to the class at the beginning of the semester, their rote speeches usually consist of: hometown, classification, major, campus affiliation, and some random thoughts. However, after about the tenth student, very few of the introductions are memorable or can be differentiated from the others. For that and other reasons, I designed the biographical sketch (bio sketch) exercise as both a writing assignment and a way for students to present themselves to one another in a more meaningful way. This paper describes some purposes and techniques for creating effective bio sketches in business classes.

Crafting Biographical Sketches In Business Classes

The beginning of a semester usually means new assemblies of students into classes, most of whom may not know each other. This is especially true in freshman and sophomore foundation courses where students come from a variety of majors and bring different perspectives and interests to the class. To help them settle in, teachers often use a popular ritual, the self-introduction, where students are allowed about 30 seconds to tell the rest of the class about themselves. The teacher usually suggests the list to tell: hometown, classification, major, campus group memberships, and “anything else you would like to share,” to allow some levity in the process. Much of the success of this ritual relies on students playing along, but after the tenth or so introduction, the process tends to be repetitive as students rush through their lines to fulfill the obligation. Sometime ago, I decided to turn this ritual into a full-fledged writing task where students would create a one-page bio sketch for their classmates to read. This paper explains purposes of bio sketches, an assignment outline that can be adapted to different classroom situations, some particular issues that students should consider as they craft their bio sketches, and reactions from students who have performed the assignment.

The bio sketch is widely used in professional settings to introduce individuals to one another. Most organizations will post the bio sketch of their senior managers on their websites for clients and other members of the public to see. People running for elected offices will distribute bio sketches that appeal to their constituents. Authors, artists and pundits create bio sketches, as do athletes, entertainers and bloggers. In a world that is now more connected and personality driven than ever, combined with a decades-old shift toward self-improvement (Lair, Sullivan & Cheney, 2005), creating a bio sketch is essential to building a personal brand and to gaining an advantage in the competitive marketplace (Kaputka, 2006). Giridharadas (2010) echoes the feeling of many self-branding experts who say that in the new, media-driven

economy, individuals are expected to develop narratives that will resonate positively with audiences they encounter in real and virtual spaces.

Creating a bio sketch can be a useful exercise in the business class. Many college students now bring years of work, volunteer, athletic, military, or other experiences to the classroom. Some of my students have reported workplace encounters and dilemmas normally associated with more seasoned workers. Writing about these experiences can help them examine such aspects of their lives, which, according to psychologists Conway and Pleydell-Pierce (2000), “is of fundamental significance for the self, for emotions, and for the experience of personhood over time” (p. 261).

Bio Sketch Assignment

The bio sketch exercise is given on the first day of class after the syllabus and other preliminary course activities are discussed. I tell students that we will forego the usual oral introductions in favor of a visual exhibit of their short biographies. After their eyes widen in surprise (“Is this an art class?”), I give them a handout outlining the rationale and objective of the exercise, steps to preparing the bio sketches, and how the bio sketches will be presented in class.

Rationale and Objective of the Bio Sketch. A biographical sketch is used by professionals and students to give others insight into their backgrounds. It is to be used to present one’s achievements and experience to potential clients, customers, supporters, peers, interviewers, and other audiences to gain credibility and respect. The bio sketch includes some of the items included in a traditional resume, as well as personal perspectives that are not typically included on a resume. The objective of this task is for you to write a bio sketch that introduces yourself to the class, using specific guidelines.

Steps in Preparing Bio Sketch

Students will be provided these guidelines.

1. *Review bio sketches.* Read the articles “*How to Write a Professional Biography for a College Student*” (Cook, n.d.) and “*All about me in 100 words*” (Puljak, 2008) available online. Afterwards, search online for examples of bio sketches, especially of persons in your field or career interests or whom you admire. (Show students a sample bio sketch which they should model for the assignment.)
2. *Consider the objective of your short bio.* Give the class insights into who you are, where you have been, and how these things define you. Make sure the information will enhance your image.
3. *Recall your experiences and jot them down.* Write down the experiences, achievements and events that have been significant to you. These may come from school, home and the larger community. Once you think you have enough notes, decide what you want to include, develop or discard. Again, whatever you choose to include in your bio sketch must enhance your image.
4. *Write a one-page bio sketch.* Use third person writing style and complete sentences. The bio sketch must consist of three paragraphs, single-spaced, block-style, and 175 to 200 words. Use one-inch margins and 14-point Calibri font for each paragraph. Place your name above the paragraphs in bold, capitalized, 16-point Calibri. Place a single space between your name, the first paragraph, and subsequent paragraphs. Include the word count at the end of the third paragraph.
5. *Insert a professional photograph above your name.* It should be a clear, sharp, black and white upper body portrait. Grainy photographs or photos cropped from other photographs

showing someone else's body part or clothing should not be used. The photograph should be 2.5" wide x 3.5" long. The portrait should be inserted above your name and both should be centered on the page.

6. *Print the bio sketch on a laser-printer.* Use a laser printer (not laser jet), letter-size, white sheets to produce a crisp, clean document with no smudges. Secure your sheet in a thick envelope or manila folder, and save the file on a flash drive or in your email so that it is easily retrievable. Bring the bio sketch to class on the designated day.
7. *Displaying and Viewing the Bio Sketches.* On the day of the exhibit students should arrive early and tape their bio sketches on the walls around the classroom similar to works of art displayed in a gallery.

The bio sketches are spaced optimally to allow groups of two or three students to read them simultaneously. Students are given about two minutes to read each bio sketch and then they should be able to answer these questions after reading and reflecting on the bio sketches:

- What was most impressive about the bio sketches? Why?
- Except for your own bio sketch, whose bio sketch stood out? Why?
- How are you similar to your classmates in terms of your background and experiences?
- In what ways are you different from your classmates?
- How would you improve your bio sketch?
- What presented the most challenge as you created your bio sketch?
- What was most gratifying about writing your bio sketch?

Issues to Consider in Writing Biographical Sketches

When writing bio sketches, students will be tempted to use the format and lines they would use in traditional class introductions, which they would have honed from previous

semesters and in other classes. As we discuss the assignment prior to starting the assignment, several issues arise and are clarified, and these are some of them:

1. Remember, you have only 200 words. You cannot say everything and relate every event in your life. Carefully choose the events that best define the image you want to present to the rest of the class. Use your words wisely.
2. The first line in your bio sketch should define you like a topic sentence defines an essay or memo. Thus, it is not usually necessary to state your name (again), place of birth, or date of birth unless these facts have some significance to the overall statement. So ask yourself, what does it mean that you were born on March 15, 1994? Or that you grew up in San Antonio, Texas?
3. Saying that you were raised in a large family, a poor family, a single-parent family, or other types of families is not enough. The achievements of your relatives are not yours; such facts must be connected to your accomplishments, motivations and the overall theme of your bio sketch. Not everyone from these family situations and your own family had the same drive and success.
4. Avoid negative or sarcastic statements about where you live (ghetto, barrio, Bible belt, trailer park, etc.) and focus more on how you grew and succeeded despite these circumstances or how you chose to help improve them.
5. Statements about religious and political affiliations should be avoided unless facts such as date and place of birth play some significance in the rest of your bio sketch. If they did, then describe the outcomes and experiences from such affiliations rather than just saying, "I am a staunch X."

6. Note the thin line between sharing your triumph over adversity and merely expressing a victimized status. Make sure that your narrative showcases you as someone who is ambitious and faces the challenges presented to you.
7. Don't focus on what you do not have or what you have not done as deficiencies; instead, discuss what you have accomplished and where these accomplishments might lead you.
8. Avoid talking about your jump from major to major, unless there is some significance to your life bio sketch. It's relatively easy to switch majors. However, if you recognize some transformation in your beliefs, motivations or interests that influenced your choice of major, you may describe it.
9. Your future (career plans) should be implicit in your bio sketch. When your classmates read the bio sketch, they should see that you have a mission based on the experiences you chose to share.
10. Use adjectives and superlatives sparingly. While you want to show the intensity of your experiences, you don't want to exaggerate your narrative. (This will also help you save precious word count.)

Student Reaction to Assignment

At the beginning, some students were puzzled by this writing assignment simply because they had never had to write their introductions, and they felt restricted because they could not focus on the facts they had been used to giving in their introductions. Thus, I had to emphasize the purpose and rationale of the exercise, and convince them that it was not a freshman essay (Gellis, 2011) but a commonly used business document that is rarely taught. After they viewed many examples of bio sketches on business, nonprofit, and government websites, the variations in style confused some students, so steps outlined in the assignment needed to be enforced.

The top three challenges that students identified about creating bio sketches were: writing about themselves using the third person voice, “bragging” about their accomplishment, and getting the right dimensions on their photographs. We discussed that the use of the third person voice downplays the self-emphasis and that they should view the bio sketch as a form of introduction except in written form. They seemed more comfortable talking than writing about themselves, so we debated the irony of (their) sharing so much of their lives on Facebook and other social media. (They tend not to see the irony.) In terms of the photograph, they learned to manipulate the image on the page to achieve the right dimensions, though some students still could not find an appropriate professional pose and others submitted grainy, shadowy photographs.

In spite of these challenges, students have found this assignment beneficial. They have been struck by the diversity of their experiences and their drive to be active in their home and campus communities. They also found that digging beneath the surface of their lives helped them to unearth experiences they had taken for granted, and allowed them to talk about themselves in new ways. By the end of the bio sketch discussion, they had come to know their classmates in deeper, more meaningful ways.

Conclusion

The bio sketch assignment is a new and creative way to engage students in writing and critical thinking from the very first class meeting of the semester. It transforms a clichéd ritual into a meaningful exercise that prepares students for the types of attention to process and detail that will be expected throughout the course, and it gives them an opportunity to see themselves as persons with valuable experiences that can translate into lessons and values that serve to guide their academic and career choices. They also learn to connect their past to their future in more

conscious, deliberative ways. They realize that they are more than a sum of facts and circumstances, but that they can show how such circumstances have shaped their decisions to go and grow in certain directions toward their ultimate success.

Creating a bio sketch helps students recognize the importance of defining their image and reputation at a time when such practices and techniques are popular in social media and professional networking. Students can be taught to be less fixated on majors and grade point averages. Creating the bio sketch humanizes them beyond the cold facts of their resumes by requiring them to use elements of their experiences to weave informative, persuasive narratives that they can continue to build on as they move from the classroom to the competitive marketplace.

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