

Hello COR Instructors,

Are you at a point in the semester where you need to revitalize your class? Has the newness of the semester worn for your students?

The following is from Jill Murphy, Associate Professor in the Health Department:

During an Opening Meeting, President Bitterbaum stressed how important making connections are for students, including the faculty-student connection, and how retention is important with our fewer number of high school students applying. President Bitterbaum's talk reminded me of Guided Autobiography, a class activity that has worked extremely well in my classes to engage students in making a connection. This activity could work very well in the COR 101 classes.

The attached sheet gives a brief description and some questions/prompts on how students can focus on the major branching points in their lives. This exercise can be conducted in a 50 minute class if students, in advance of class, prepare a short story (1,000 words, which is 2 pages typed) about a major branching point in their life. Students are told to write on a topic they feel comfortable sharing in a small group. In class, students are placed in groups of 4 or 5 to read their papers aloud and share real, meaningful stories about their grandparents, parents, siblings, friends, etc. After each person reads their story, the students in the group provide positive verbal comments/responses to show they heard the story.

The stories are incredible and some of the students get a bit misty during the exercise. In my classes this semester, students relayed an overwhelming positive response, saying things like they feel they have for the first time connected with other students, they see that others have gone through many experiences that they would never have known, they see common experiences, they felt they shared important aspects of themselves with others that they never would have normally, they think they will be friends with these people, etc. From my perspective, I have seen a noticeable difference in conversations between students before and after class. They talk to each other and don't stare at their cellphones!

If you would like to discuss Guided Autobiography, please email me at [Jill.Murphy@cortland.edu](mailto:Jill.Murphy@cortland.edu) or call me at ext. 5613.

Instructors, you are welcome to contact Lori ([lori.schlicht@cortland.edu](mailto:lori.schlicht@cortland.edu)) as well for additional information.

# GUIDED AUTOBIOGRAPHY

## The Story of the Major Branching Points of Your Life

Branching points are the turning points in your life - the events, experiences, or insights that shaped your life and its directions. They may have been big events such as attending college, changes in your family, marriage/divorce, war, or moving to a new city. Or they may have been small events that had big outcomes, like reading a book or going on a hike.

What have been the branching points in your life? What events caused the turning points? Which ones put a stamp on your life that you carried forward? Some events are positive in their effects and others negative. Think of your life as a branching tree. New branches form, others may drop off for lack of sun or nourishment. Some flourish and bear fruit, others don't. Or think of your life as a river winding its way to the sea. Where did it begin, widen and narrow, twist and turn, and add branches as it flowed? What caused it to change its course, storms, floods or droughts?

*Sensitizing questions: (The questions are guides to prime or stimulate your memories and your thoughts about your life. The questions are not intended to be answered in a literal manner. Read through them and react to the ones that open windows on your past. Each life is unique and the priming questions don't have the same value to all persons.)*

1. What was the earliest branching point in your life? What happened and why was it important? How old were you at the time?
2. What people were involved with you at the branching points, e.g., family, friends, teachers, doctors, lawyers and others?
3. Were there any important happenings in your environment, natural or man-made crises that changed the direction of your life? Tornadoes and fires destroy homes, floods and automobile accidents leave changed lives behind them, did any affect you?
4. Were there any lucky events in your life that had positive outcomes on the directions it took such as winning an award, being recognized for something you accomplished, winning a lottery, getting a new job, or falling in love?
5. Were there any bad events that influenced your life that caused it to branch such as divorces, deaths, or illnesses?
6. What persons influenced the direction of your life in a major way, such as a parent or grandparent, teacher, friend, political or religious leader? What was their influence?
7. Did your family move their home when you were young and in school that had a big impact on you? Did you ever change schools that had an important effect on your life?
8. Did changing jobs have lasting positive or negative effects on the flow of your life?
9. What branching points were you responsible for in contrast to outside influences?
10. Have there been any branching points in your life about which you changed your views later such as its long ranged importance in your life or your feelings about it? Were you angry then and contented now?
11. Do you think of the flow of your life as typical of most people or is it unusual, in what ways?

