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Project Runway, The Bachelor, Survivor, Extreme Makeover—these are the names of only a few of the “reality shows” that now saturate television culture. The popularity of this trend bewilders many and provokes, for some, questions about our search for sincerity and authenticity—a desire so strong that we seek it out in the most artificial of places. Despite their moniker “reality,” these television programs are filtered through the apparatus of producers, camera operators, editors, and, of course, the ratings and advertising machine before they ever even hit the airwaves. Post-production work leaves very little “reality” intact, and most reality programs do not mirror any reality at all; they, in Jean Baudrillard’s terms, “[bear] no relation to any reality whatever,” for reality T.V. “is its own pure simulacrum” (170).

While these programs simulate various mediated versions of “reality,” they do have one common denominator—the main “characters” are not formally trained actors tied to a fixed script. Yet there is little doubt that many of these participants are terrific performers. In some programs, such as Big Brother (CBS) and The Real World (MTV), the spectator is privy to “confessions,” moments when a participant looks directly into a camera and, supposedly, reveals her or his “true” feelings. Likewise, spectators also see the behavior of the participants change as they interact with different people or face new challenges. Participants in reality television programs, in fact, audition for the roles, and are often handpicked by program producers because they seem to fit a stock character like the “nice guy,” “overbearing bitch,” “sweet innocent,” “quiet conniver,” or “arrogant jock.” As the individuals work toward the coveted prize, they often create high drama and intensely entertaining television. Whether participants are redecorating a room, spearing fish in a tropical lagoon, vying for an engagement ring, or competing for the chance to work for a multi-million dollar company, their interaction serves as a concrete example of the prevalence of performance in our everyday lives.

The performative feature of reality television has become more apparent as networks tweak and re-release new iterations of successful reality television premises. NBC, for example, wrapped its sixth season of Donald Trump’s The Apprentice last spring and Survivor China (the fifteenth season for CBS) premiered in fall 2007. When The Real World debuted in 1992, television viewers accepted the
authenticity of the players, and no one thought much about how editors worked to shape the reality into entertainment. As today’s viewers see programs reiterated, however—and as contestants on the programs draw from their own spectator knowledge to manipulate the circumstances and their fellow contestants—it becomes more and more difficult for viewers to accept the authenticity of the participants’ performances and the premise of “reality” altogether. This contrivance is also becoming clearer to the generation of students sitting in our classes who enjoy reality television. This is a generation who by osmosis actually may grasp the concept of everyday performance and performativity in a (dare I say?) real way. Our students, who make up a huge portion of the reality-loving audience, may adore this programming, but they are savvy enough to understand that the participants are not necessarily giving sincere, unfiltered, authentic performances.

These programs may be so successful because they satisfy a desire to tap into the inner lives of people—to see people being sincere, raw persons. This trend, albeit in a less dramatic fashion, is also manifesting itself in Composition Studies. Reality television provides a cultural backdrop for concurrent discussions in Composition Studies that praise the subjectivity of writing, encourage a more personal type of academic writing, and advocate teaching methods that challenge traditional academic discourse through alternative discourses. In January 2003, College English devoted an issue to creative nonfiction, and in both 2001 and 2003 College English published special issues on personal writing. Furthermore, a December 2006 College Composition and Communication included a piece by Paul Heilker on the essay. In recent years, several books have revived the personal, including Barbara Kamler’s Relocating the Personal: A Critical Writing Pedagogy (2001), Deborah Holdstein and David Bleich’s collection Personal Effects: The Social Character of Scholarly Writing (2001), and Karen Surman Paley’s I-Writing: The Politics and Practice of Teaching First-Person Writing (2001). Paul Kameen, in the September 1999 issue of College English, reviewed books by Thomas Newkirk, Donna Qualley, Kathleen Blake Yancey, and Christian Knoeller, arguing that these works address “a set of terms that might on first take seem retrograde self, voice, experience, the personal: all bulwark terms of ‘70s expressivism” (100). Kameen speculates that these texts indicate a “general unease with the extent to which those keystone terms of expressivist approaches to teaching writing have been exiled from our disciplinary discussions for too long” (101), and he wonders if they signify a turn to the “next and new” in Composition Studies (102). In short, these shifts suggest a renewed interest in the role of the writer in the rhetorical situation; now we need new theories and methodologies to make these trends matter in the lives of our students.

Many of us teach writing with one version or another of the rhetorical triangle, a tool that is also helpful in reading currents in composition and rhetoric. It could be said that expressivists leaned too heavily on the “writer” point of the triangle, and, in reaction, social constructionists focused the gaze on the other two points of purpose and audience. If, however, the rhetorical stance (to use Wayne
Booth’s term), which balances the writer’s personality and agenda with the needs and expectations of an audience is a necessary component of successful communication, then we can have no discussion of writing that does not fully theorize all three points of that triangle (Booth 27). Purpose and audience have been given their due attention in the last two decades, but after expressivism was so vehemently critiqued, scholars did not develop a methodology to account for the writer in the rhetorical situation in a balanced way. Roz Ivanič argues a similar point, noting that in much composition research

the discoursal construction of writer identity is implicated but not foregrounded. . . .Yet writers are so important to writing. Writer identity is, surely, a central concern for any theory of writing in two senses: what writers bring to the act of writing, and how they construct their identities through the act of writing itself. Why has there not been more attention paid to these specific issues? (93-94)

I am most interested in Ivanič’s second concern, the construction of identity to create the “discoursal self” or the “writer-as-character” (25).

In the remainder of this essay, I suggest that performance studies offers theories and methodologies for writing teachers to use to help students construct discoursal identities. At the moment, there are lively conversations about constructing that identity through writing that is more personal; I am interested in addressing the construction of that writerly character in all types of writing. And I believe that performance studies may be particularly attractive to the next generation of students, who—as spectators of reality television and participants in interactive games, web communities, and blogs—have an innate understanding of the performativity of everyday life.

PERFORMING AN ANTIDISCIPLINE

Performance studies, a large and varied body of work that takes the fluidity of self and the relationship between word and action as its central concepts, can help us step away from more traditional constructs of the discoursal self and toward more complicated, fluid, and socially responsible writerly characters. The field of performance studies is built upon the work of Kenneth Burke, J. L. Austin, Erving Goffman, Victor Turner, Richard Schechner, and other dramatists and theatre scholars (McKenzie 12, 33). To get an sense of the breadth of work included in performance studies, one only has to glance at the table of contents of books such as The Performance Studies Reader, edited by Henry Bial, which includes the names of performance artists, philosophers, anthropologists, and professors of education, English, and theology, to name a few. Many who are writing about performance today treat performance studies as a kind of “interpretive grid laid upon the process of study itself, and indeed upon almost any sort of human activity”
Thus performance may be thought of as a type of terministic screen or what I call a “performative screen” that we can use to view the construction of identity in writing.²

Performance has recently gained more attention and credence in academe, and Jon McKenzie explains in his book *Perform or Else* that since World War II, the term *performance* has been seeping through disciplinary boundaries, around traditional academic subjects, and into public discourse; it is, as Richard Schechner remarks, like a tricky sidewinder snake and “[w]herever this beautiful rattlesnake points, it is not going there” (357). Despite its inclusiveness, those working in the field of performance studies reject its labeling as an “interdisciplinary” field and prefer to think of it as an “antidiscipline” (Carlson 188-89). Some also refer to performance studies as a “new discipline” that brings together ideas from areas such as sociology, queer theory, anthropology, and theatre. However, McKenzie emphasizes the reinvention of performance as a larger idea: “No, the term ‘performance’ has not been coined in the past half-century. Rather, it has been radically reinscribed, reinstalled, and redeployed in uncanny and powerful ways” (13). It is true that the terms *performative* and *performativity*, like the field of “performance studies” or “performance theory,” have been transmogrified and picked up in numerous scholarly contexts. For example, literary studies has seized upon theories of performance to examine antitheatrical prejudice in literature (Barish), performance and Athenian democracy (Goldhill and Osborne), masculinity and Roman rhetorical performance (Gunderson), and the significance of performance in Mark Twain’s work (Knoper).

McKenzie teases out how performance studies has been employed in various contexts, and concludes that performance is *the* new paradigm and “will be to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries what discipline was to the eighteenth and nineteenth” (176). The discourses of performance (including theory from all over the scholarly landscape) and the ways of thinking they provide, claims McKenzie, will recreate our perceptions of everything from identity to economics, desire to media. For example, discipline favored book learning, but performance pushes learning out of traditional academic boundaries, as knowledge is created and disseminated outside and off of the traditional classroom stage (184-85). Due to changes in technology, in particular, “life becomes one long continuing ed program” (185). Additionally, adopting the mindset of performance requires us to “consider things as provisional, in-process, existing and changing over time, in rehearsal, as it were” (Schechner 361). Performance studies challenges Composition Studies to refocus its attention away from fixing the discipline to stretching it, opening the definition of “composing,” and requiring us to be open to periods of indecision and flux. Overall, performance’s project is to challenge, to “go the limit, play the margin, be the other” (McKenzie 189).

The challenge of performance has already been accepted, to some degree, in Composition Studies. For example, Karen Kopelson published a piece in *College English* (2002) about the uses of performativity, and Jenn Fishman, Andrea
Lunsford, Beth McGregor, and Mark Otuteye discuss the benefits of performance studies in *College Composition and Communication* (2005). J. L. Austin and Judith Butler, in particular, are two figures from performance studies frequently cited in composition scholarship. Austin stands as one of the most influential of performance theorists, arguing that language—and individual utterances specifically—should not be assessed in terms of their truth or falsity but upon whether or not they achieve their intended aim. In *How to Do Things with Words*, he proposes that words do not merely describe, that they are not constative, but that words actually do and are thus performative (6-10). Attention is shifted, as Della Pollock puts it, from asking if a statement is true to asking “What does it do?” (21). Despite the fact that performance studies is based, in part, on language philosophy, this body of work has had surprisingly little influence on composition scholarship, a fact noted by Kopelson. She writes, “Performativity remains most conspicuously absent, perhaps, from composition scholarship that is expressly pedagogical in focus” (18).

Performativity, as articulated by Judith Butler, emphasizes the fact that gender is not natural and is instead a result of a series of performed actions (12); by extension, identity then is always under construction, a product of both individual performances and the normalizing institutional structures that dictate which identities will be seen and counted as legitimate. “Queer and performative pedagogues, then,” writes Kopelson, “often take up Butler’s call to risk the incoherence of identity. Perhaps more to the point, they are not only ‘willing to risk’ but actually *work to compose* identities that are inscrutable, troubling, outside the realm of what can be known” (23). Kopelson emphasizes the important role of the teacher who risks this incoherence, who refuses to be fixed and then, by extension, refuses to fix identity norms based on sex, sexual orientation, gender, class, race, and any other number of factors of her or his students. Like Kopelson, I am excited about the possibilities of performance theory for Composition Studies. While I believe that Austin’s and Butler’s work might have further implications for the field, it may also be time to examine other figures to see what their work offers our students.

Although the performative screen offers us several different perspectives that could enhance our teaching of writing, this essay focuses on three figures who have the potential to influence the way we approach issues of identity in the writing classroom. These three thinkers deal directly with performance as an act: Erving Goffman looks at social interaction in terms of theatre, Bertolt Brecht insists on using theatre to shed light on our social performances, and Anna Deavere Smith reminds us of our capacity to learn about ourselves and others through performing multiple roles. Thus, they all come from that portion of the performative screen or performance stratum focused on identity. McKenzie claims that the performance stratum will produce subjects different from those produced by discipline. Rather than the “highly centered, unified subjects” produced by discipline, the performance stratum “constructs and proliferates decentered subjectivities” (179) and from it “hybrid, hyphenated subjects rapidly emerge and immerge, passing through a variety of subject positions” (McKenzie 180).
These three figures from performance studies then offer us new lenses focusing on social performance, social action, and the critical consideration of the distance between the character and actor that are immediately useful to our work teaching writing. If students can see their already-developed performativity, we might then be able to help them harness this performative power and emphasize the social nature of our characters, the responsibility that comes with all performances, and the creativity that we exercise each day as we move from world to world, adjusting our linguistic and physical performances through word choice, tone, organization, dress, and style of all kinds.

In order to perform my conviction that theoretical discussions of performance must be accompanied by performative practice, I have interspersed writing assignments throughout this essay in text boxes, signifying the reciprocal relationship between the theory I discuss and its enactment in the classroom. These assignments are written to a student audience and are meant to be flexible and transferable across writing courses. Some of these assignments may work together as a short writing sequence; all may be used separately in various writing courses, from first-year writing to more advanced courses in writing in the disciplines. As they stand here, most of these are shorter writing assignments, but they could certainly be expanded into larger projects. For ease of reading, I recommend reading the text of the essay before reading the text boxes on that page.

**Everyday Characters**

The first step in helping students construct discoursal selves is to facilitate their vision of themselves as performers. Therefore, I will focus here on explicating how students might come to better understand the performances they give in their everyday lives and illustrating how they might develop and perform discoursal selves that displace the construct of “authentic writer.” Just as Paulo Freire emphasized the generative possibilities of language, inviting students to draw from the language of their lives, writing instructors might invite students to draw from the characters they play on their everyday stages.

Erving Goffman stands as a foundational figure in performance studies, a sociologist who framed social interaction as a series of performances and was “one of the first (among many) social scientists to turn to the theater for a framework with which to interpret non-theatrical behavior” (Bial 57). Goffman’s theory of social performance attempts to account for the fact that a person can, in one day, be a sister, a student, a mentor, and a lifeguard or be a part of a religious community, an ethnic community, or a political community and play all of these parts well. Life situations shift constantly, and we shift along with them in our performances, often very gracefully and effortlessly. The audience, our fellow performers, the setting, the scene, the goal—each of these factors influences our performances of selves. With certain people or within certain situations we may
feel that we are not performing at all, but other circumstances require more of an effort and force us to attend consciously to our facial expressions, tone of voice, eye contact, or even our posture or stance. Goffman suggests that an actor (read individual) assesses each social situation in order to present a self that will be acceptable by the audience. This construction of self has less to do with who the actor really is and more to do with how to make the most effectual connection in a particular situation with a particular audience. Recently Goffman has been quoted by compositionists to enhance connections between linguistic performance and self-performance, and here I’d like to make a more explicit link between students’ various performances and how helping them see those performances might make them more rhetorically agile and confident writers.3

Students come to our classrooms knowing how to perform. One way to raise awareness about these various linguistic performances might be to help them see how they are already performing multiple roles in their writing. Richard Courage, in a 1993 College Composition and Communication article, notes that what the writing students do outside of class, in their “private” lives, may, with reflection, enable them to see themselves as writers with rhetorical skills. He writes, “Although their daily lives involved writing in many forms (letters, notes, lists, diaries) and for many purposes (to maintain relationships, to exchange information, to remember things, to help their children, to secure entitlements), [students] saw school writing with its particular forms and conventions as an alien activity” (486). In other words, students may see the writing they do outside of class as functional and maybe even “natural.” It’s the academic writing that feels like the “put on” performance. To encourage his students and help them develop more confidence in their abilities to write for school, Courage suggests that we invite students to “identify their nonschool literacies and reflect on the resources hidden there and their relation to academic literacy . . . [by] giving assignments that challenge students to become researchers into their own patterns of language use” (494).

In my first-year and advanced writing courses I use an assignment based on Courage’s work that asks students to collect all of their writing for one week, talk about their work with others, and then write a short reflection on their writerly characters. After this exercise, students usually recognize that they are already adept at performing multiple textual characters. I often give the assignment early in the semester, as I begin to introduce students to the relationship among audience, writer, and purpose. After completing the paper, students are excited by the amount of writing they already do in their lives and have a more tangible understanding of the way that writerly character is shaped by social factors. This project underscores the performative agility that these writers already exercise, an important skill that we discuss as being transferable to the writing they will do in school, at work, and for their own personal pleasure (if they so choose). Most students are delighted to see how far along they already are in adapting writing from context to context.
PERFORMING MULTIPLE CHARACTERS

However, instructors should also emphasize to students that even in writing that seems “natural,” they are actually performing some sophisticated rhetorical negotiations. A next step toward developing and enacting textual characters should give students practice in bringing together their different characters and deliberately writing in characters they are performing in their lives. One way of doing this would be for students to write an argument, not from one point of view, but from the many different positions they already inhabit. The early expressivists, in their desire to assist students in expressing their beliefs, asked students to “find voice.” Now, in an era when authenticity and the belief in a stable selfhood have been challenged, those of us invested in helping students to express themselves and articulate their beliefs in sophisticated, compelling ways, must phrase our assignments differently. I propose, in alignment with the work of poststructuralist feminist theorists, that “perform your selves” might be a better directive for writing students. For, if it is theoretically, materially, and pedagogically suspect to require a student to “find voice,” might be a better directive for writing students. For, if it is theoretically, materially, and pedagogically suspect to require a student to “find” or “express” an “authentic” voice, we must not ignore the discoursal self but find new ways to articulate the role of the writer in her writing. Many feminist thinkers have challenged the notion of a fixed identity, suggesting instead that there are many identities within each of us that we might try to better understand and perform. Particularly, the work of Trinh T. Minh-Ha and Gloria Anzaldúa provide theoretical foundations for multiple performances, and recently published texts that perform multiple voices provide examples of how this might be done.

This alternative approach to argument has been included in scholarly journals for quite some time, but there has been little work devoted to methodologies for teaching students to write in multiple characters. “Making Writing Matter: Using ‘the Personal’ to Recover[y] an Essential[ist] Tension in Academic Discourse” by Jane Hindman appears in the September 2001 issue of College English, one of the special issues of the journal dedicated to personal writing. The piece begins as

Writing Log Assignment: Your Many Roles

Sociologist Erving Goffman has suggested that we are all actors and that we are always playing multiple roles depending on the situations we encounter. I’d like for us to start thinking about the different characters we play in our writing. For one week, keep track of your writing. Collect every e-mail you compose, every IM, note, letter, response, paper, memo, shopping list, etc. Bring these with you to class, and, in groups, we will sort through one another’s repertoires. Then write a short paper (2-3 pages) reflecting on how your writing differs from character to character. Include quotes from your collected writings.
any typical academic essay might: Hindman situates her argument within the field and states her purpose. But, on the third page, the text changes drastically, and, through alterations in typeface and font size, Hindman begins to alternate between three characters—her “professional” character with whom she started the piece (in a traditional Roman font), a character that is commenting upon and supplementing the text voiced by the first character (italicized), and the “JaneE and I’m an alcoholic” character (in an Arial typeface).

Hindman is arguing that there is a way to “embody the tension between social constructionist and expressivist perspectives of the nature of writing and the writing Self,” but she also argues and performs that argument through writing in these different characters (101). Hindman remarks,

That interruption [with other characters], however, is not essential; nor is it necessarily more sincere, compelling, or genuine than the former gesture. I am not compelled by some “true self,” or “authentic voice” to interrupt my academic or professional self with an italicized “real” voice telling me to get more clear. I could revise the time and type of interruption if I wanted to: after all, I constructed it. (102)

I want students to feel this same kind of control over their writing and rhetorical choices.

Another example of writing in multiple characters is found in Peggy Phelan’s introduction to The Ends of Performance. Here Phelan presents herself not as a unitary author, but as selves in conversation with one another. In this essay, organized according to the traditional dramatic form of “acts,” Phelan offers her readers a history of performance studies. Rather than take the traditional voice of the academy, Phelan allows her reader to see the seams in her thinking and gives examples of her different characters who are in conflict with one another. “Peggy, the worrier” is anxious about the possibility of organizing a conference about performance studies; “Peggy, the querulous” is insistent that Peggy live up to the ideals she preaches to her students; “Peggy, the dreamer” reminds her of hopes for the field and the project; and then “Peggy, the worryer” resurfaces (2). In this essay, Phelan is many different selves, presenting the kind of openly conflicted, multi-positional writing that may be a source of encouragement for students who are struggling with articulating how they feel about issues at a time when they are also trying to figure out who they are.

**Acting the Character**

Performance as seen through the lens of sociology can shed some light on our everyday behavior and help students see the writerly characters they perform. The experimental work of Hindman and Phelan draw attention to the discoursal characters we present and repress in print. However, on the stage of
academic writing, students may need other concrete strategies to create characters that seem less familiar, and for this we might turn to work in performance studies that is most directly connected to the theatre. In America, most are familiar with acting methods firmly based in realism. Phillip Zarilli remarks that “Actors trained in the American method often approach characterization by ‘living the role,’ that is, erasing distinctions between ‘self’/‘the real’ and the fictional role” (18). Of course, even the most realistic portrayal “is just as conventionalized as any other acting style; conversely, other acting styles, including historical ones, are just as emotional and ‘real’ as realism” (Hornby 214). Like early expressivist approaches to writing, an approach to acting that favors realism often relies on the search for the real, true, or authentic self, suggesting, first of all, that that self is reachable, and secondly, that it can be re-presented by the actor. However, in performance studies there is a move away from this emphasis on authenticity. Acting theorist Michael Kirby suggests that “there has, within the last ten years, been a shift toward the not-acting end of the scale” (53). More modern approaches to performance are less focused on imitating life; therefore, a definition of acting need not entail the process of looking inward to find emotions or experiences to project a character that is “real” because it is drawn from the real experiences of the actor.

This idea might be applied to writing as well. Focusing on the writer in the writing classroom does not necessarily have to follow the path of

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**Complicating Argument with Multiple Characters**

In class we have talked about constructing arguments, and you have written a short paper identifying an issue that is important to you, one that you feel conflicted about. Rather than writing a standard persuasive essay in which you present research and argue one stance on your issue, you will write a paper in which you enact some of the public characters you perform in your life.

As you are writing, think about how your life characters influence how you feel about this topic. Does part of your opinion come from your position as an African-American? Do you feel conflicted on the issues due to your character as a mother? You may indicate the performance of characters through using different fonts to perform your character (as Hindman does) or by indenting portions preceded by “As a student” or “As a mother.”

You may also write the argument through a series of monologues enacting your different characters. You may find that there is some overlap in your characters—that’s fine. Indicate that through hyphenating them.
personal or confessional writing. Every rhetorical situation calls for a discursral self, and these performative theories of character construction can help us have more productive conversations about how writing in the university, all writing in fact, requires careful construction and attention not only to audience, but to the character in writing. Students should then be instructed in writing performance, trained to understand and act as different characters in their writing.

German playwright and director Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) stands as one of the most influential thinkers in acting. In contrast with more realistic approaches to acting in which the actor is required to merge seamlessly with the character, Brecht suggested that actors focus on how both they and the character fit into society as whole. Aggravated by the under-use of theatre as a means of persuasion and as a tool for revolution, Brecht proposed an alternative to the Aristotelian theatrical formula. He was interested in more than catharsis and insisted that “the one tribute we can pay the audience is to treat it as thoroughly intelligent. It is utterly wrong to treat people as simpletons when they are a grown up at seventeen. I appeal to the reason” (Brecht, “Conversation” 14). Brecht was committed to drawing the spectator out of the slumber induced by stage productions that create a realistic, emotional portrayal of people and events. In short, Brecht’s Epic theatre shattered the illusions of reality and bourgeois theatre, alerting the spectator to her or his position as spectator, thus creating a critical political subject who could experience emotion and be moved to action. Brecht then stands as another figure in performance studies who refurged identity and performance as intimately related to larger society and action. As Henry Bial remarks, “If we recognize that virtually all human behavior involves performing, then we can think of the theater as a kind of laboratory where actors and directors stage experiments to help us better understand ourselves” (183).

For many students, the position of college writer resembles a spectator position. Even when invited to write “open-ended” papers, many students, understandably, are capable of identifying what is required of them and performing accordingly in order to survive, make the grade, move through the often-intimidating composition sequence. Brecht’s attitude toward the spectator can provide a new lens through which we see the student writer. Most composition instructors would agree that the best writing is the product of an author who is active and deeply interested in the creation of that work. In Brecht’s vision

[that] the spectator was no longer in any way allowed to submit to an experience uncritically (and without practical consequences) by means of simple empathy with the characters in a play. The production took the subject-matter and the incidents shown and put them through a process of alienation: the alienation that is necessary to all understanding. When something seems “the most obvious thing in the world” it means that any attempt to understand the world has been given up. (“Theatre” 71)
While watching the events of college life unfold before them, students are anxious to fit in, both socially and academically. Writing is one of those sites in college that seems to exacerbate insecurity. Students might benefit from alienation in order to move from the role of spectator-writer to actor-writer. Teaching academic language and academic writerly characters as though they were “the most obvious thing in the world” makes critical engagement with those conventions impossible, limiting students to the position of spectators who can merely look on as the conventions are written for them, passively stepping in to write within them. They are confined by the theatre of the academy to the seats, watching the “experts” perform roles that later they will be expected to imitate. Many students, when they enter the university, have a notion about how to “perform the student,” or “invent the university,” as David Bartholomae puts it. In these performances, students try to approximate the language, attitude, and forms that they think we want. This might mean that they organize the paper according to the suggestions or questions that we list on the assignment sheet; or it might mean that they overuse the thesaurus, assuming that these words will mark their performances authentically collegiate. They are performing; they are conscious of the fact that they are not trying to “be themselves” in their writing, but they are “performing the student.” As instructors, instead of reading this student as lazy or lacking in creativity, we could also read that student as attempting to perform the “thorough” or “quality” student who can follow directions and turn out a product up to specifications. Many students know how to reiterate the role of student. What they need help with, what we should be teaching these students, is acting. Performing a writerly character is not a result of looking deep within and “finding” a quality to bring to the page. It’s not magic, nor something that some people can “just do.” But in order to do this work, students must leave the spectator position behind and learn how to perform effective characters that will enable them to connect with various audiences across the disciplines. As Ivanič suggests, “I have come to see every act of academic writing as, among other things, the writer’s struggle to create a discoursal self which resolves the tension between their autobiographical self and the possibilities for self-hood available in the academic community” (336).

Brecht suggested that the spectators of drama be drawn out, incited to take a stand, and maybe even be moved to enact change. A Brechtian approach to writing pedagogy would help alleviate fears of expulsion or imposture that students might feel when writing at school. Students would be encouraged to see themselves as actors, as conscious beings, in the larger social sphere, acting within characters as they invent, and writing characters rather than passively taking on characters they see performed within discourse. They would, in McKenzie’s terms, push the limits of their identities rather than discipline them to fit the mold of the academy. Brecht explains his vision for acting as follows:

The actor does not allow himself to become completely transformed on the stage into the character he is portraying. He is not Lear, Harpagon, Schweik; he shows them. He reproduces their remarks
as authentically as he can; he puts forward their way of behaving to the best of his abilities and knowledge of men; but he never tries to persuade himself (and thereby others) that this amounts to a complete transformation. (“Short” 137)

Brecht supplements actors’ self-exploration with social exploration, insisting that his actors approach their characters with their eyes and conscious minds open, and requiring that his actors explore the world around them, acting as historians and socially aware citizens before acting on the stage. Therefore, students writing in the Brechtian method would carefully study the roles they are asked to inhabit. In the absence of a script with lines, stage directions, and background information, students could engage in a series of assignments inviting them to research their character and gain an understanding of what role that person plays in the larger society. They could then think about the character in relation to the audience(s) and also consider what kind of person/character they would be in relationship with their knowledge, audience, and social responsibility. Brecht provides writing and rhetoric with a lens that sees performance as relational and not completely submissive to any force, be it internal or external. Instead, the Brechtian performance includes actors who work on “keeping the character at some distance from herself and showing it to the audience” (Auslander 54). It may be said that the actor will “withhold presence from the character she plays in order to comment on it” (Auslander 58) or “quote the character” (Brecht, “Alienation” 94). In other words, Brecht expected character to be the product of a dialogue among the actor, the world, other people, and the actor’s reflection on those relationships.

Quoting the Disciplinary Character

Explore some documents written by professionals in your chosen field of study. For example, if you aspire to be a Director of Marketing, locate some documents written by such people. It’s important that you also do some more general research in order to fully understand what these professionals do on the job and how they fit into the hierarchy of industry.

After you have read the documents and understand the larger context of that work, you must consider how you will “quote the character” of this professional, thinking about the type of Director of Marketing (or whatever profession) you want to be. Reflect in writing on the following questions: What type of work ethic would I have? What would my goals be? What would I do to maintain goodwill and morale? What attitude will be required of me?
In order to “quote the character,” of course, students need to understand that there is a difference between the selves that they normally write in (most likely for school writing, as “student”) and the most effective and persuasive writerly identity for a particular rhetorical occasion. Even in the theatre, Brechtian acting practices are often very subtle, and most productions use deliberate breaks in the theatrical apparatus to create distance between the actor and character. For example, actors might directly address the audience as actor rather than character, the stage might include backdrops or multi-media presentations to call attention to the constructedness of the performance, or elaborate costumes may be omitted, leaving the actor looking more like the actor than the character she/he is performing. But in the process of creating character in writing, the quoting of a character may be enacted in short writings, freewritings, and in writer’s memos accompanying papers written by students in other characters. In such reflective pieces, students can articulate the social position of their character in the larger world or in a smaller institutional context and articulate how that character’s languages and positions work with or against the identities students bring with them to the classroom.

**WRITING AS ME, NOT ME, AND NOT NOT ME**

The Brechtian approach to acting draws attention to the artificiality of stage performance, disrupting the smooth lines of linear narrative and one-on-one alignment of actor and character. Brecht’s commitment to social change has appealed to feminists, and materialist feminists in particular have taken up his philosophy and techniques to direct specific attention to the constructedness of identity in performance (Dolan 108). Jill Dolan writes that “[t]he materialist feminist project, then, becomes to disrupt the narrative of gender ideology, to denaturalize gender as representation, and to demystify the workings of the genderized representational apparatus itself” (101). Additionally, feminist theatre criticism works “to unmask the naturalized ideology of the dominant culture most theatre and performance represents” (17).

The commitment to social change and the unmasking of both gender and ideological constraints is central to the work of Anna Deavere Smith, a contemporary theatre artist who overturns the formal structures of the theatre by going through an intense process in which she “search[es] for American character” in order to create multi-voiced, multi-layered, non-linear, one person performances (Smith, *Talk* 12). Clearly influenced by Brecht, Smith also refuses a seamless identification with the characters she performs, preferring instead to display the differences and find the performed character through an interrogation of the space between character and actor. Smith gained a reputation in the 1990s as a serious theatre artist with her one-woman shows that enacted what Victor Turner termed “social dramas,” or breaches in the social fabric, one of the ideas that contributed to the foundational work in performance studies (Turner 11). Smith’s method is to talk to people who have experienced a social drama, recording her interviews and
listening to the tapes numerous times to develop a performance piece in which she performs these “American characters” on stage. Smith’s work shows the social drama through the voices of the community and acts as part of the redressive machinery that helps to mend the breach in the social fabric. Turner explains that theatre can act as a redressive force, as “a public way of assessing our social behavior” and “portray its characteristic conflicts and suggest remedies for them, and generally take stock of its current situation in the known ‘world’” (11).

Students might read Smith’s *Twilight, Los Angeles* or *Fires in the Mirror* (or view the film versions) to get a clear picture of the painstaking care she takes in transcribing the interviews and to understand how a multi-vocal collection on one issue enhances the complications of falling on “one side” or another. This is, however, different from writing a paper from one’s own repertoire of characters. A classroom enactment of Anna Deavere Smith would entail reflecting on the self and reflecting on the characters met, understanding the difference between the two, and spending time delineating what makes one character one entity and the writer another. Somewhere in between is a character that can be performed, a character that neither cancels out the identity of the writer nor represents an authentic writerly self. Smith always emphasizes that she is very aware of the fact that when she performs one of these real people onstage she is not getting

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**Writing as Me, Not Me, and Not Not Me**

Anna Deavere Smith talks about creating distance between the character and the character performed. Think about a discourse community you are interested in joining or one that you are anxious about entering into (a disciplinary field, a club on campus, a church). You will interview someone in that area, read some of their writing, and then read other work by professionals in that field. I want you to understand how one person performs this writerly identity, how others perform it, and then consider how you will perform it. Think about how these writers sound in these texts—what words contribute to their characterization? How do they frame their writing? What values do they seem to hold? How do they address their audience? What do they reveal about themselves? After creating a character sketch of this writerly character, think about your characters. What is the difference between you and these various characters in this community? Will you have to shift any of your values in order to join this community? What will be the most challenging thing about adopting this character? How can you play this character differently and still be a part of the discourse community?
them quite right. In the introduction to *Fires in the Mirror*, she remarks that she does not see the self as the “ultimate home” of the character but that “the search for the character is constantly in motion. It is a quest that moves back and forth between the self and the other” (xxvi-xxvii), and she locates character “in the obvious gap between the real person and my attempt to seem like them. I try to close the gap between us, but I applaud the gap between us” (xxxvii-xxxviii). Smith strives “to really inhabit the words of those around me” (xxv) through a “reenactment, or the reiteration of a person’s words. . . . [traveling] from the self to the other” (xxvi), not to become that person or gain a “real” understanding of that American character but to “learn about the spirit, the imagination, and the challenges of my own time” (xxv).

In her interviews, she carefully attends to her participants’ spoken and body language:

> I can learn to know who somebody is, not from what they tell me, but from how they tell me. This will make an impression on my body and eventually on my psyche. . . . I’ve emphasized to my students that acting is becoming the other. To acknowledge the other, you have to acknowledge yourself. . . . I don’t want to own the character and endow the character with my own experience. It’s the opposite of that. What has to exist in order to try and allow the other to be is separation between the actor’s self and the other. (qtd. in Martin 52)

Smith refers to Schechner’s work, claiming that her character is “not me” and “not not me” to suggest that the actor and the character remain two separate entities. The performed character emerges from the gap between the actor (Smith, in this case) and the character on the page (or the person interviewed).

Thinking about composition as performance in a more theatrical sense based on Smith’s ideas can help students better understand their everyday performances, give them a critical sense of what it means to be a character in another discipline, and can even foster a greater understanding of how our characters are in dialogue with others in a community. But it is also important to mark the transgressive nature of performance. If we value the ability of students to construct discoursal identities that will help them in their professions, we must also help them, on the road to becoming writers, become adept at performing characters who may not be traditionally found in the academy. We must also provide opportunities to explore, develop, and perform non-academic characters. Some students might want to write an article for a third-wave feminist zine like *Bitch: A Feminist Response to Popular Culture* or *BUST*. Others might want to work on a blog to play the role of film critic or another role that does not fit with “college writing” but that might open doors for them to think about writing as an activity relevant to their lives beyond the academy.
Asking students to try on different roles, to write in voices that seem vastly different from the ones they use with their friends or at home, requires a great deal of patience on our part. We must make room for and think of this kind of practice as simply a rehearsal. The suggestions for writing included throughout this essay provide opportunities for such rehearsals. Inviting students to consider the popular culture phenomenon of reality television and the scripted nature of these “realities” can open the door for discussions about writing as performance. Students in any writing course could benefit from the “Writing Log,” “Quoting the Character,” “Writing as Me, Not Me, and Not Not Me” assignments, as all writers gain from reflecting on their writerly positions as they relate to other characters they will be challenged to perform. However, students might also gain from completing the “Writing Log” assignment just prior to working on the “Complicating Argument” paper. The “Complicating Argument” and “Understanding the Social Drama” assignments provide writing opportunities for students in argument courses or more advanced composition courses, settings in which students might feel more agile and confident in their abilities to move in and out of various characters. Assignments such as these represent a first step, an initial foray into cracking into the performance stratum in Composition Studies.

Looking at composing through the performative screen entails character development on our part as well, a shifting from the role as evaluator to the role of the audience member that our students have in mind for their work. Mike Rose reminds us that as students write for the academy, they will “miss the mark a thousand miles along the way. The botched performances, though, are part of it all” (54). The first-year writing classroom, in particular, is a space where students who may be unfamiliar with college discourse can try it on and move around in it. They can also begin to investigate the discourse communities they may want to be a part of outside of their schoolwork and professions. In fact, they should be engaging in multiple performances and the investigation of multiple academic discourses. After all, you cannot play a role if you don’t know the part.

Ann Berthoff has said, “Composing involves the writer in making choices all along the way and thus has social and political implications: we aren’t free unless we know how to choose” (22). Viewed through the performative screen, the classroom is a stage where students play with their identities, consider the artifice of genres and language, and make choices about their deliberate performances. Students do not have to choose whether they will “be themselves” or whether they will achieve their goals of participating in new discourse communities. Teachers do not have to limit their writing assignments to either personal writing or traditional academic discourse. As scholars in composition and rhetoric and writing instructors, we need to turn our gaze toward the performative screen, bring our students and their writing center stage in our classrooms, and see the choices and the possibilities made visible through acknowledging the performative nature of our language and our lives.
NOTES

1 We can assume that most have seen earlier versions of the program they auditioned for.

2 Kenneth Burke is a fitting figure to invoke at the start of a discussion about performance, as his dramatism is one of the early connections between performance and contemporary rhetorical studies.

3 See Ivanič’s Writing and Identity, Newkirk’s The Performance of Self in Student Writing, Gilyard’s Voices of the Self: A Study in Language Competence, and Gray-Rosendale’s Rethinking Basic Writing: Exploring Identity, Politics, and Community in Interaction.

4 See Newkirk’s The Performance of Self in Student Writing for a thorough discussion of how students read the classroom situation and attempt to perform the characters they think we want.

5 The “Understanding the Social Drama” assignment is originally from Brenda Helembrecht’s English 112 course and Katie Johnson’s English 495 course, both at Miami University, Ohio.

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28 Composition Studies


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RE-SEEING RESISTANCES: TELLING STORIES

TELLING STORIES

I tried to explain the focus of this paper—the embodied theorizing about teaching I was trying to articulate, the lure of teacher stories about our “resistant” students that I wanted to understand—to my mother several weeks ago. She’s been a math teacher and a professional tutor for more than a quarter of a century. These years in a range of teaching positions have coalesced into what often seems to me an enviably uncomplicated theory of teaching: “You figure out what you want to happen in a class, what you want kids to learn, and then you try to find the best way to make that happen. Things don’t always work out like you planned, and you need to think about why that happens, too.”

“I’m writing about student resistance in the classes I teach,” I told her, “trying to think about roots of it and better ways to respond to it. I am going to call the paper ‘Re-Seeing Resistances.’ I want to think about the stories we tell and the metaphors we use.” She looked at me, blinking a few times. I tried again. “You know, when students resist you, when . . . .” Talking about Henry Giroux, Paulo Freire, Ira Shor, or Robert Brooke probably wouldn’t make this project any more transparent for her, and I couldn’t think of another way to explain the project except through stories that bordered on complaint.

Days later, she told me about a troubling student: distracted, unwilling to listen to her suggestions, complaining that the problems were too hard and had no purpose in the real world. “He’s wasting his parents’ money,” she sighed, “and he just won’t try.”

Resistance, I thought. You know it when you see it.

My mother has taught advanced classes at a small Catholic elementary school. She also does private tutoring for at-risk students from neighboring high schools and colleges in an affluent suburban area. I teach at a large public, urban university. She tutors Algebra through Calculus in a fairly traditional lecture-style format. I teach a range of classes from College Writing to graduate courses in composition theory. My students work in pairs and small groups, workshopping papers, experimenting with writing exercises, and revising their own texts. On the surface, our professional lives are very different. But the stories we tell are remarkably similar: our struggles with students who do not complete assignments.

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or do not “participate” as we think they should; students who push back, withdraw, make trouble; students who seem determined not to learn.

Such stories seem to be an eternally present condition of my teaching life: in the hallways, at the copy machine, and between classes, there’s lots of teacher-talk about resistance. We love to talk about what students do and don’t do. We tell stories punctuated with despair, humor, even anger. Listeners play an important role in this ritual: nodding sympathetically and knowingly, sometimes sharing their equally epic classroom labors. (The pages of our professional journals are bursting with similar tales: Lad Tobin’s baseball hat-wearing, back-row dwellers; Joseph Trimmer’s students who find Henry James “a bore” [51]; the teachers in Elizabeth Rankin’s study who find students to be “aggressively apathetic” [1]; or Bonnie TuSmith, who hears racist hostility in her students’ silence—to name but a few in the staggering collection of teacher-tales of resistant students.) Soon after I started teaching, I grew uncomfortable with the ways our stories seemed to exaggerate the “stupid, beast-like, childish aspects of college writers” (Helmers 1), even while I knew we genuinely liked, even loved, these students we were demonizing. (Was there a student-equivalent, I wondered: in dorms or at the dining hall, were students telling stories about their comma-splice phobic, revision-obsessed, journal-crazy composition teachers?) I started to think these impromptu “can you top this?” contests might be the only way my colleagues and I could ever really talk about the struggles in our classrooms.

Over time, I began to see that such stories served critical functions for me. Venting frustration in safe ways, I heard practical strategies for managing classroom situations that baffled me. Further, as Marguerite Helmers argues, such negative representations in teachers’ narratives have the effect of exerting control; I noticed that I seemed to lapse into such unkind depictions only when I felt the least sense of authority in my own teaching life. And telling and hearing these stories helped me to feel part of a community of teachers whose professional lives had few cohesive moments. Likewise, reading that those compositionists whose work was shaping my own pedagogy faced resistance too reassured me; perhaps student resistance was not confined to the classrooms of the less experienced teachers, the young, the women, those without the visible signs of institutional authority. After one particularly virulent exchange of stories that transformed my after-class anxieties into something more manageable, I began to wonder if something else was at play in these stories. Perhaps these stories permitted me to ask the unspeakable: why do students resist? Why are students resisting me?

I realize that I’m already implicitly sliding here into a “me versus them” vocabulary (or a “we teachers, them students” one), a position I find fundamentally unsettling. Must we describe teacher-student relationships this way? Is this “me versus them” mentality merely a viewpoint (albeit one that feels natural to many of us), just one way of looking at the metaphor of resistance in the classroom? In the remainder of this essay, I examine several stories of resistance, ones that may feel disquietingly familiar, and try to read them through new lenses. In the
final pages, I return once again to the these stories for a third reading, a final attempt to make sense of them and reflect on the role such stories might play in our teaching lives.

Have you ever had the experience of telling a teaching-story and not remembering if it is your own, or if it’s one you’ve heard so many times it just feels like it is yours?

The copy-room stories of resistance—those I tell myself, those I hear from my colleagues—melt into each other, become indistinct in a blur of student indiscretions and beleaguered teacher-hood. I’ve seen this student before, this behavior before; this student has done this in another class before. . . . Eventually almost every class moment fits itself neatly into a familiar genre: The-Class-That-Doesn’t-Speak, Perpetually-Late-Paper-Guy, The-Student-Who-Says-“I-Don’t-Know.”

During my first semester of teaching, I found myself tragically disappointed by some minor but continual infraction of the classroom “rules” by one of the strongest students in the class; this crime was going to pull his grade down. An older colleague chuckled at my anxiety: “When you’ve taught as long as I have, it will get easier. You’ll realize this is nothing new.”

But shouldn’t it be?

What is lost in seeing the pattern rather than the particular?

**LESSONS IN RESISTANCE (I), IN WHICH I FIRST ENCOUNTER STUDENT RESISTANCE**

I remember resistance from my elementary and high school days, even if we didn’t call it that. I think about Jonathon, who sat most days in the back corner of my third grade classroom. After Jonathon was guilty of some sort of “misbehaving”—not following directions, talking out of turn, pulling someone’s hair—the teacher would order him to move his desk to the “punishment seat” near the windows. Once moved, he seemed content, not chastened or humiliated as she’d clearly intended; he seemed far happier with his view of the parking lot.

I recall one lunch period when Jonathon (already relocated) calmly picked up his milk carton and tipped it over his head. When the teacher noticed, Jonathon jumped up, ran out of the room, out of the school, and (rumor had it) all the way home. Unsurprisingly, the next day, Jonathon’s desk was in the corner when the morning bell ushered us in.

Some years later, through the small town gossip-mill, I learned that Jonathon’s parents had essentially abandoned him to his grandmother while they negotiated a contentious divorce. Looking back, I wonder now if his outbursts and apparent lack of attention were perhaps more than “behavior problems” (the worst crime in my school), indications of a learning disability overlooked in the 1970s in a school that proudly did not have “special” classes.

I remember sixth grade when we endured a substitute for three months. No one thought to tell us she was there while our favorite teacher recovered from bypass surgery. At least once a week, someone devised a misguided plan.
to torture her: dropping pencils at a designated time, insisting we had “free hour” every Friday, conveniently “forgetting” assignments. These synchronized resistances inevitably met with punishments of angry tirades, forfeited recesses, extra assignments, or threats to tell our parents. I don’t think any of us particularly enjoyed these rebellions or expected anything to come of them. So why, week after week, we reluctantly but dutifully followed these “great ideas,” I can’t fully explain. The real punishment came when our teacher returned to school and remarked that he was disappointed we had behaved so badly in his absence. The whole class, tough boys included, cried that day.

I remember my Catholic high school and its new avenues for resistances. I think about my lab partner brazenly forging his parents’ names on permission slips for field trips and making sure we all knew about it. I think about the host of small-scale rebellions that took place every day: reading biology notes during British Lit.; cutting Phys. Ed. to go to a café; wearing our uniform skirts marginally shorter than school rules permitted. Such resistances inevitably carried a price. We honors kids knew that. Lectures from the vice principal, detentions, and worst of all, lowered grades. These were supposed to deter us. But we resisted anyway, desperately trying to define ourselves in ways we hoped would make high school easier to survive.

How do you define student resistance? The shape of teacher-narratives provides several ready interpretations:

- Students are disengaged.
- Students are apathetic.
- Students don’t care about this class (their writing, their learning).
- Students don’t want to learn.
- Students are limit-testing.
- Students hate the class (writing, their teacher).

I know; I’ve told stories with these punch-lines, too. But hard as I might try, it is difficult to reconcile those teacherly explanations with my own student life. Do they really explain why, even as a pathologically good student, I secretly envied Jonathon’s escapes to his corner seat? Or why I took such profound pleasure in minute violations of an archaic and absurd dress code? Why do these explanations of resistance feel like they have so little to do with the student stories I tell, with the student I remember being? And if these explanations seem so inadequate, so wrong, how did I get from being that student to this teacher?

So for now, I’m struggling to resuscitate the term “resistance” to bridge this gap, to train myself to see beyond the limited definitions our stories allow.

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LESSONS IN RESISTANCE (II): SCIENCE CLASS GIVES ME A POWERFUL METAPHOR

“See how they resist each other?” I watched the demonstrations in my seventh grade science class with undisguised wonder, tuning out the explanation of the mechanics of magnetism and polarity. I ignored the larger scientific point my teacher was making and fixated on the almost magical properties I had seen acted out numerous times with refrigerator magnets.

Placed in one configuration, the magnets are attracted. (To my adolescent psyche, the fact that opposites can indeed attract seemed tremendously weighty and explained much about the world.) To overcome that force of attraction, some external intervention is needed. Rearranged, the magnets repel each other, maintaining a particular distance between them. While I’ve absorbed a bit more about how polarity and magnetism work, I confess that I’m still mesmerized by the way that powerful magnets will bounce off each other when you try to force them together.

That was the part that fascinated me most: it’s not simply that magnets, in this arrangement, don’t pull toward each other; they actively push each other away. A force that can’t be seen, only felt, controls how these objects interact with each other; how they behave with respect to each other. One magnet can cause the other to move through this force. And by a shift, the force of connection becomes its opposite, the cause of non-connection. Somehow the power to pull together is inextricably bound to the force that pushes apart.

Resistance and its partner: opposites that give shape to the universe hold it together really. Without them and the structure they provide, for example, planets (I’ve been told) would cease their rotation and revolution. An implosion? Planets jettisoning off into the far reaches of space?

Without resistance, there is chaos. I could never fully fathom the science of resistance—charged particles and force fields—but I’ve never forgotten it either. You know it when you feel it.

I wonder if those same properties I vaguely grasped in science class—attraction and resistance as inverted forms of one another; both bodies shaping their interaction; the gravitation toward one polar relationship or the other; that both the forces of resistance and attraction are necessary to maintain stability—might tell us anything about our classroom interactions and the properties of the teacher-student relationship.

My colleague told me about her class of pre-nursing students, all vying for admission into the university’s highly competitive program. Because most of these students were academically successful, the admissions process often depended on the recommendations of their professors.

My colleague found these students to be the most agreeable, accommodating class she’d ever taught. No one ever missed a deadline, shirked responsibilities on group work, or questioned her feedback or assignments. In short, they were the most compliant students. Ever. She jokingly called them her Stepford Students.
LESSONS IN RESISTANCE (III): WRITING RESISTANCE

I am resisting right now. I am supposed to be writing an article for a professional journal. After years of graduate school and conference presentations, after a dissertation and published pieces, I should know what academic discourse looks and sounds like. I do know. I’ve written it often and read a great deal more. But look at what I’ve done so far. This isn’t the way a paper is supposed to look: no linear structure, few citations, no apparent movement toward a traditional conclusion. (Yes, there will be some conclusions of sorts; just hang on.) Too many stories, too many chains of thought that link together without hierarchical arrangement, too much “I.”

Should I write more about James Berlin, Henry Giroux, Patricia Bizzell, or Ira Shor? Should I couch my reflections in more abstracted language so this piece isn’t about me or you or students, but about the idea or theory of resistance? Perhaps I could restructure this thinking and these questions into a linear, top-down argument that would wrap itself up into a tidy conclusion. But I would lose something critical in that choice. This slippery thing of student resistance, which often feels more than three-dimensional when I experience it, changes shape; it becomes flatter and more manageable when I write about it in my most “academic” of voices. So for now, I’m pulling at the loose threads in my thinking that cross each other, tangling up, weaving in and out of my teaching.

You know resistance when you write it.

Teacher-tales often paint resisting students as trying to push away from the teacher, from the class community, from the particular subject, from education itself. Michelle Payne’s “Rend(er)ing Women’s Authority in the Writing Classroom,” Nancy Sommers’s “Editor’s Choice: The Language of Coats,” and Lad Tobin’s “Reading Students, Reading Ourselves” provide particularly good examples. But do our stories suggest what the partner-force to resistance is? What makes the “good student”? What classroom force parallels magnetism’s attraction?

From the implicit definition in our stories, the opposing concept would have to be a term that includes “non-action that pulls together”: passive compliance. But is the opposite of student resistance really compliance? (For those of us who see ourselves as critical teachers, I suspect this becomes tremendously complicated indeed.) And is compliance really the force that will make our classrooms productive? Should we teachers seek compliance?

After her semester with her nursing students, my colleague longed for students who didn’t meet every lesson, every question, and every assignment with pleasant smiles and the “right answer,” students who might have messy and disorganized, passionate and engaged papers. She craved students who wrestled with new ideas rather than simply agreeing with her perspective, students who would challenge her and force her teaching to grow.

Resistance. You know it when you miss it.
One Teacher-Tale, or Lessons in Resistance (IV)

I meet with my College Writing students nearly every week in individual conferences. The early meetings can often feel tense; students sometimes seem cautious, shy, tongue-tied. As some have told me, seeing a teacher outside of class time carries the weight of discipline—reminders of detentions and other punishments. I think many students simply don’t know what to expect. What do you do, talking to a teacher for 15 whole minutes? (The night before my first writing conference in college, I broke out in hives from sheer anxiety.)

And I’m nervous about student conferences, too: no matter how many years I teach, I worry that I won’t be able to put students at ease, ask the right questions, or think on my feet. Shy myself, I worry that we’ll have nothing to say or that I’ll talk entirely too much. And a conversation feels so much riskier than written feedback that I can revise, tweak, perfect. But conferences fit me better, fit my teaching better, I think. In one-to-one interactions, students can see possibilities, while my written feedback ends up looking like a list of directions no matter how I carefully phrase it. In trying to articulate their goals and choices, writers take on a new authority that I just can’t translate into other kinds of feedback. And I like the intimacy that develops from getting to know my students; I think I’m a better teacher for seeing my students as individuals.

Inspired by Don Murray, I try to get a student talking about her sense of the paper, its genesis, and the direction it might take. I don’t correct, fix, or direct, at least not in the early weeks of the semester. I ask many questions and hopefully say very little.

As the weeks unfold, I think students get more comfortable with these conferences. Students who are initially hesitant usually grow more confident as they begin to take a more assertive role in shaping our discussions. From course evaluations, I’ve learned that many students come to value this aspect of the class, even when they experience a rocky start.

Rob didn’t undergo this transformation. He was a kind of student I had grown wary of. Rushing a fraternity in his first semester, he wore baggy jeans and baseball caps pulled low over his eyes. He rarely offered anything beyond the briefest answer possible and never laughed at any of my jokes. In class, he had to be cajoled into joining group work, claiming he could do the assignments “better and faster” on his own. Week after week, our conversations felt stiff and uncomfortable: he didn’t seem interested in getting any more engaged and wouldn’t meet my eyes when we talked. And it only got worse from there. I asked Rob open-ended questions to get him talking about his draft, verbalizing his decisions about what went into the paper and his revision plans. Even students who didn’t “like” the class seemed to understand how to get by in conferences; Rob seemed uninterested or unwilling to even try.

“How did you come up with the idea for this paper?” I would ask, excited to hear about his first draft, thinking this would be the day we made a breakthrough.
His drafts always did seem thoughtful, full of promise; either he had to loosen up or I had to ask the magic question.

“I had to write something, so I did,” sounding genuinely confused by the question.

“Well, what do you want this paper to accomplish?” A softball question he could surely answer.

Pause. “I don’t know. I just wanted to get it done.”

“Hmm. What do you think works well in the draft?”

Longer pause. “Not much.”

And so on. This happened for six or seven weeks. This was why many of my colleagues hated conferences. We’d have a short, painful meeting, rarely making it to the 10-minute mark. Then Rob would leave without, I think, much happening for him or his writing. I would make a check in my grade book to mark that he’d been there, and then I’d add a tiny pencil mark (-) next to it, to remind myself of how frustrated I’d been, how spiteful he’d seemed. Luckily for me, Rob’s conference slot was bracketed by two enthusiastic students who would bring energetic revisions each week, convincing me that it was indeed Rob’s fault those 15 (or 10 or 8) minutes were so disastrous.

And honestly, I just couldn’t understand Rob’s hostility. After my initial angst, my experience with writing conferences as an undergraduate had been one of the most powerful learning experiences of my life. Rob’s classmates blossomed with the individualized attention I could never provide in a class of 24 students. I believe that seeing their writing and their questions taken seriously by a teacher was—I hate to use this problematic term—an empowering experience. So how come Rob couldn’t see it, couldn’t appreciate the opportunity he had? Even self-proclaimed “non-writers” were usually won over by mid-semester, and we could have productive conferences that didn’t feel like dental surgery without anesthesia.

Rob’s conferences weren’t getting much better; if anything, they were getting worse. I began to resent the energy I was putting in trying to get him excited about his writing. Where was his resistance coming from? Did he resent a female teacher? One only a few years older than him? One who didn’t play a more traditional red-pen-wielding role? All of those things should have made me more approachable, but maybe they just made me look weak. I looked around the office that delineated my lowly status at the university—a room scarcely bigger than a broom closet, crammed with scarred desks and chairs and shared by three teachers, the steam-pipe running through the room providing unbelievable belches of heat, the flickering fluorescence of the overhead light—the residents of this room were clearly at the bottom of the institutional food chain.

Still, his resistance, his refusal to do this simple thing I asked of him—to talk about his writing—was infuriating. Why was I doing all the work?

Before long, I dreaded seeing Rob. One afternoon, I lost patience halfway through our tired, scripted dialogue. I asked questions; he answered minimally. I
encouraged; he stared at the floor. My temper had worn thin and I was dangerously close to overreacting, I knew. But his resistance to me, to the class, to writing had suddenly, overwhelmingly become intolerable. I wanted to scream. I wanted to be that teacher I still remember from elementary school, whose mere presence was so powerful no one dared defy her. I wanted a principal’s office I could send recalcitrant students to. I wanted to yell, “Give a damn about something!”

In a moment of which I am still ashamed, I couldn’t bear this, his resistance, anymore.

“Rob,” I snapped. “We’re not getting much out of this. Why don’t we just cut it short today?”

He finally looked at me, stunned. I was surprised to see his face. “What?”

“I’m really tired and you don’t seem to be fully engaged, so let’s stop for today.” He got up slowly. At the door he turned and looked back at me. “I’m never sure what you want me to say here.”

When he left, I closed the door and put my head down on my desk. I had expected that I would feel vindicated: Rob knew his bad behavior was not acceptable any longer. Instead, for the first time, I was certain that I had failed irrevocably as a teacher.

Resistance. Rob’s anger and hostility manifesting itself through a cultivated passivity? A reaction to my lack of status in the university? Certainly I have told the story that way. But I am uncomfortable with this version of the narrative. In it, I become a victim of Rob’s perceptions (or my perceptions of Rob’s perceptions), rather than an active participant in the teacher-student relationship. And to see Rob’s silences as deliberately menacing confuses my feelings for his, much as I perceived Rob only through the lens of some “model student” who could (and would) smoothly adapt himself to my pedagogy.

Perhaps you read my story about Rob and see it as a relatively simple one: you can diagnose where I went wrong. Maybe I should have adapted my conferencing strategy with him and offered the directive feedback he needed or wanted. I lost my temper too quickly; I was overly sensitive and misread the perceived slights about my status. I should have been able to figure out how to transform his “not knowing what to say” into the kind of conversation I wanted to have. And maybe you think I’m making far too big a deal over one lost student, one missed opportunity.

All of those seem like plausible, if partial, interpretations. But each focuses on blame, much as my original version did; now I want to learn how to tell such stories better, more fairly, even if they are messier, more complicated. And the look of quiet sadness on Rob’s face as he left my office that afternoon haunts me more than the even the most openly argumentative or visibly threatening students I have worked with since.
So I want to shift the frame of resistance and move Rob and I beyond the “stock characters” (Helmers 2) in a predetermined plot I’ve written us into: surly, silent, unwilling student and well-meaning, good-hearted, thwarted teacher. In order to understand what happened that semester with Rob, perhaps it will be productive to use a different metaphor and consider the science of resistance that my first version of the Rob-story ignores.

Students are part of this resistance we are seeing, but so are teachers; I exerted at least as much (unproductive) force as Rob did. I wonder now how I may have fostered the resistance in our relationship through my own anxieties, fueled by previous experiences with students “like” Rob. While I want to believe I’m supremely fair and equitable, that I treated all students the same that semester, my body language, inflections, facial expressions, and other unconscious responses may well have betrayed my growing hostility. Further, as Richard Miller argues in “The Arts of Complicity,”

we can forget that we are the individuals vested with the responsibility for soliciting and assessing student work; we can imagine that power has left the room. . . . The students however never forget where they are, no matter how carefully we arrange the desks in the classroom, how casually we dress, how open we are to disagreement, how politely we respond to their journal entries, their papers, their portfolios. They don’t forget; we often do. (18)

While I’m skeptical that students never forget the institutional power we wield, Miller’s reflections remind us that students have a limited set of options open to them in our classrooms. In Rob’s case, I suspect the gestures I intended to feel “empowering” were experienced as some teacherly sleight-of-hand, a game he couldn’t quite grasp the object of, no matter how hard he tried. Altering the rules of how the teacher-student relationship is “supposed to work” isn’t always a simple and transparent change; as Rob pointed out, how are students “supposed to know what to say”?

Resistance becomes visible only in moments like this one with Rob or those with other “disruptive” students or in their inverse, as with my colleague’s “Stepford Students.” But aren’t all teacher-student relationships, including the productive ones, defined and ordered by a kind of polarity or balance, a sometimes-invisible tension? I don’t want to stretch the metaphor too far, and I think it’s overly simplistic to say there are only two possible configurations for teachers and students, that like magnets we either attract or repel each other in an all-or-nothing fashion. But I suspect the tensions in those relationships of more moderated compliance are harder to see: what force holds those teacher-student relationships in balance? While it’s easy to see the resistance of students like Rob as value-laden (he was Bad Student giving me a Hard Time), I think it’s more productive to understand this energy in terms of attraction and its opposing force, as an inherent part of this
relationship. Perhaps student resistance doesn’t have a “negative” charge as my story about Rob suggests. It simply is.

In that last look Rob gave me when he left my office that afternoon, it seemed clear to me for the first time that his so-called resistance wasn’t deliberate or malicious, as I’d begun to fantasize. It was, instead, a kind of (mis)alignment, an inability on both our parts to fall into the roles that I had set up for us. The force I exerted on Rob (and the confusion he experienced when the rules about being a good student had changed) left him appearing to be resistant. When I didn’t adapt, he couldn’t either.

I don’t mean to suggest that I see such conflicts as unalterable, such moments of resistance as unredeemable. To return for the last time to my science metaphor, like magnets, both teacher and student need to shift to realign their interaction. I cannot assume students will magically fall into a comfortable orbit around me. And had I been able to read the other cues in my conferences with Rob without an emotional overreading, I might have seen things differently. What I read as overt hostility now seems to me a profound discomfort at his own inability to please me, to be the good student who could give the teacher what she wants.

There’s more to the Rob story, more context I had not adequately or accurately read at the time, which I’ll return to later. But for now, I want to leave you where I was that afternoon, contemplating how to face those next 15 minutes alone with him.

**Lessons in Resistance (V): The Romance of Resistance**

Fed by my impatience with dates, statistics, and “facts” that made history seem so remote from how I saw the world, I remember learning about The French Resistance in history class. We read in our textbooks a tiny little section about the European underground opposition to Nazi occupation—those citizens who covertly organized themselves to the fight the spread of an oppressive regime. The Resistance was about people, people who felt and suffered and acted. Thus began my unabashedly romantic view of underdogs and revolutionaries, real and fictional alike. That year, my literature class led me to A Tale of Two Cities, reinforcing my romantic notions about self-sacrifice, love, and duty in the mythic Sydney Carton.

Coincidentally, at about the same time I discovered old black and white movies and was charmed by Casablanca. While it’s not the most sophisticated thing to admit, I suspect this movie has shaped my impressions of what it means to be politically resistant more than anything I’ve read since then. I was smitten with the movie, all of it—Rick’s quiet nobility in doing The Right Thing, even when it didn’t appear to others that way; the expatriates’ defiant rendition of “La Marseillaise” to drown out the Nazis’ war songs; Ilsa’s overwrought decision between two lovers who represented two very different models of resistance; Laszlo’s showy politics.
So resistance, at least in Hollywood incarnations, novels, and high school textbooks, tapped into my love of stories and my theories about how the world should work—grand ones in which self-sacrifice is far more important than self-preservation. Honor. Liberation. Justice. These were the things we’re fighting for.

But maybe that depends on who is telling the story.

So I learned that resistance is a political and social act of subversion in the services of justice, despite the consequences to oneself. Certainly that’s the definition that we teachers apply to ourselves when we talk about our pedagogies and the ways we challenge cultural values and hegemonic practices. We resist what has come before us, what has reified the oppressive structures in our culture. We want to teach our students they should not unquestioningly accept and ingest what they are force-fed by the media, through political rhetoric, and in banking models of education. We see the world in more sophisticated, less comfortable ways, and we work to bring about change, even when others do not (or cannot) see that we are Right. So we question what it means to be literate; the traditional kinds of texts deemed “appropriate” for the composition class; the practices to teach writing, literacy, and citizenship. Challenging as it might be, we believe we can change the world one composition class at a time. Our theorizing and our practices allow us to celebrate ourselves, the risks we take, and the liberatory changes we want to bring about.

But once again, maybe that definition of resistance depends on who is telling the story.

**Another Teacher Tale, Or Lessons in Resistance (VI)**

My college education was fairly traditional. Even in seminars, it was pretty clear what the right answers were—the professor’s. No one had consulted me about my educational needs or the generative themes that would affect my own personal growth, and as far as I could tell, no one much cared about developing my voice. Compliant student that I was, I was determined to be the Best Student that ever lived and breathed in that English Department, even if that meant ignoring the uncomfortable sense of disconnection I felt the longer I was in school and with each “success” I accrued. A composition theory class in grad. school felt like a naughty secret: could a revolutionary pedagogy really work? Did the other professors know about this—students writing about topics that mattered to them, talking to each other about that writing, getting feedback without grades, and then revising what they thought was important?

Armed with Freire and hooks, Elbow and O’Reilley, I approached my grad. school teaching assignments with something like a missionary zeal: I was going to Liberate those students. Teaching writing would be about far more than producing grammatically correct prose and well-researched thesis papers; this was a chance to do something that mattered. The skeptical voices of my peers
and some comp scholars didn’t bother me. Why wouldn’t students want to be Liberated? It would be good for them; they would believe me, right? It was only in the logistics of this liberation that I began to flounder. How exactly would I accomplish these noble goals of mine?

Fortunately, I was studying and teaching in a carefully designed program that provided graduate students extensive training and support for implementing the model of writing pedagogy the program espoused. For example, in keeping with the idea that writing is a social and recursive act, students were asked to draft and revise, utilizing frequent peer feedback sessions. Seeing one’s writing through the eyes of a stable peer audience would help writers to develop, expand, articulate, and clarify; students were asked to provide descriptive feedback modeled on Elbow and Belanoff’s Sharing and Responding. Experienced teachers shared their ideas and handouts, so that by the end of my teaching orientation, I had a proven model and a carefully color-coded folder of peer-feedback options for every essay my class could write. (If there were a hero in any of the teaching stories I told in those years, it would be the Writing Program in which I taught. A clear vision, strong leadership, and carefully articulated practices allowed me to pass as a reasonably competent teacher most of the time.)

My class spent lots of time at the beginning of the semester “training”: learning how to read and respond thoughtfully and productively to each other’s drafts. I was always careful to show examples of “good” feedback and the results as well, to persuade even the most skeptical students of the value in reading each other’s work. I would visit the groups in progress, trying to “facilitate” (probably trying too hard). And I’d read each sheet students filled in, commenting on their comments to teach in order to better respond and to help students revise their own work. Looking back now, I’m a little surprised I didn’t go blind in the reams of reading I assigned myself in those early years. With time, I made innovations: deviating from the standard questions the Writing Program had suggested, rotating students through groups instead of insisting on stable ones. (Yes, my boldness was astonishing.) After the early weeks of the semester, peer feedback sessions generally ran smoothly. Students grew more confident reading their drafts aloud, and filling in the peer feedback sheets I’d borrowed-constructed no longer seemed so onerous as students learned the limits of what they could and should say. Subsequent discussions grew easier too, as students seemed to genuinely enjoy talking to each other about their drafts, often provoking discussions and questions they brought to the whole class. I suspected that part of why this worked so well was the sense of trust it fostered in students—in their own abilities to compose and comment, think and talk.

Oh yes, we were well on our way to the contained Writers’ Liberation I’d imagined for my students.

One semester it didn’t work that way. Rather than becoming more comfortable responding to each other, my students seemed to be offering shorter and less productive feedback. Some told me individually that they weren’t finding it
helpful in revising their essays. Given the kinds of responses they were receiving, I wasn’t surprised. I mentioned this to the whole class, trying to resuscitate the excitement I’d perceived at the beginning of the semester. I encouraged (“if you give good feedback, people will feel obligated to do the same”); I threatened (“it counts towards your grade”); I begged. I tried to convince myself that it was just a mid-semester slump.

One day when I announced that we would be spending the rest of the class period in peer response groups, several students grimaced openly. Others audibly groaned. My impulse—not an admirable one—was to paste on a giant phony grin and forge ahead. My students were generous and willing to try almost any new exercise or assignment, so nearly every class felt like at least a modest success. If they were so unhappy, if I couldn’t implement a tested-and-perfected practice, what did that say about me as a teacher?

“What’s wrong?” I asked, feeling like I was facing down a firing squad.

No one would answer.

“Should we move ahead to small groups then?” The anxiety shook in my suddenly-small voice.

Still no answer. It was starting to look like a bad movie rendition of what lame teachers look like. I could feel the first drops of sweat coalesce. They were rebelling, revolting against any shred of anti-authoritarian authority I had. My class was not supposed to happen that way. Somehow, they had staged a coup and my teacher-nightmare was materializing. They had challenged me and there was nothing I could do. They realized I was a fraud and all I could do was watch the disintegration. I wondered if this was what it felt like to go skydiving and realize that your parachute is temporarily stuck. Or that you don’t have one.

Hold on, I thought. I was the cool teacher, the anti-authoritarian, let’s-sit-in-a-circle, you-can-call-me-by-my-first-name, let’s-talk-about-it teacher. Had I ever forced them to do something terrible or unpleasant, just because I could? How could they be resisting me? We were doing feedback because it’s liberatory, dammit. It was good for them. I could just as easily have given them a grammar quiz, taken those papers home, and marked them up with a red pen.

Breathe. “Is it that you don’t want to do peer response, or you don’t want to do it today, or is it something else I’ve missed entirely?” Nothing. Would we just sit there in uncomfortable silence for the rest of the class? Would it set a terrible precedent if I caved in and did something else in the remaining 45 minutes? What if I insisted they get in groups right now?

After a very long silence, to my great surprise, someone spoke. Other voices bubbled up: they didn’t want to give only written feedback; they wanted to have a chance to have a discussion about all the drafts. I always assigned the groups and never let them figure out with whom it would be good or useful or interesting to work. I was asking all the questions. I was asking questions that didn’t always apply. I said I wanted them to become self-reliant and to write for
themselves and their own criteria and their own purposes, but I wasn’t letting them do that.

Resistance, I thought: it’s a whole different story, isn’t it?

Resistance. It’s far more manageable if I can dismiss it as petty insubordination and limit-testing, just bad kids trying to push my buttons. It is much easier for me to think of my peer-response protesters in those terms: students who were trying to get out of doing the hard work of the class, students who wanted to see what they could get away with, how far they could push me, while I was benevolent but misunderstood, facing unwarranted revolt. Couldn’t they see I was asking them to do something that was genuinely good for them? (The irony of this, given the stories I’ve told about my own experiences as a student, is not lost on me.)

So what do I do with my students’ protests and their “bad behavior” that so derailed me as a new teacher? I’d like to say that experience has taught me supreme grace in dealing with these kinds of open revolts, or better yet, the skill to avert them completely. But part of this project is to be honest with myself about student resistance and the stories I tell about it and to try to find a new, more useful vocabulary for framing these experiences.

Geoffrey Chase distinguishes between “opposition” and “resistance”: “opposition . . . is student behavior which runs against the grain and which interrupts what we usually think of as the normal progression of learning,” while resistance is “students’ refusal to learn in those cases in which the refusal grows out of a larger sense of the individual’s relationship to liberation” (15). Chase’s definition would allow me to dismiss these students as merely engaged in oppositional behaviors, gumming up the smooth working of my pedagogy by willfully and thoughtlessly acting out. Convenient and comforting as this distinction might be, I’m not sure that’s an entirely fair assessment. I’m uncomfortable with a schema that seems to leave students little room to respond negatively without their comments being seen as petty insubordination: in what situations would we be likely to see our own students’ actions as directed toward “liberation”? (Wouldn’t that imply students need to be liberated from us?) We seem to be foreclosing on genuine, positive student resistance when we define our key terms this way. Likewise, Chase’s definition also implies that genuinely revolutionary aims cannot grow out of “mere” opposition, a claim that also seems troubling to me. Even if my students’ sighs and eye-rolling began as “just” running against the grain, couldn’t this opposition lead to more profound consequences if taken seriously?

Who gets to define the differences between opposition and resistance? In Chase’s definition, and in most teaching-narratives, only the teacher-narrator has that power. But can she accurately assess that? Can she determine students’ motives when she has so much at stake in constructing that highly charged moment of classroom malfunction? I suspect that in telling our stories, we get caught up in what it feels like to be us in these classroom moments and mistake this for Truth.
With my peer responders, I could see only my own profound, paralyzing angst when I perceived my students to be turning on me, challenging the practices designed to Liberate them. So I am troubled by another possibility. What if my students’ groaning and eye-rolling was justified? What if opposition is resistance by another name? What might it mean to see such student resistance as a kind of political action to change those circumstances that seem unreasonable, even unbearable? What does it mean to take students’ resistances seriously? Where does that leave me and the stories I tell?

I couldn’t see my students’ sides of this story, ones that might focus on my hypocrisy or misguided attempts to coerce them into behaving in the ways I’d decided they should want to. Just as those stories about the French Revolution and the Resistance of World War II that taught me so much about the romance of resistance were situated in particular viewpoints, my stories of resistance would become something very different if they were told by another narrator. To genuinely understand the stories of resistance we tell, we need to engage multiple point of view, to teach ourselves new ways of seeing the contested space of the classroom. We need to acknowledge that students have their own stories to tell about resistance in the classroom, and, difficult as it may be, we need to listen.

Taking student resistance seriously can be particularly problematic for those of us who see ourselves as engaged in thoughtfully student-centered, liberatory pedagogies. It challenges our very self-definition to acknowledge students may see themselves as needing to resist us. But to truly be revolutionary, student-centered, democratic, engaged teachers, we cannot listen to our stories alone.

What if?

I have been holding back, pushing against my narrative impulse to tell you the conclusions to the stories I have told. On an earlier draft, one reader wrote in the margins of the Rob-story, “What next?!!” (Those exclamation points make me think others might want some resolution too.) I’m pushing back, too, against an impulse to declare, “I’ve figured student resistance out. Here are the four things you need to think about in order to understand your students and the way you can avoid or embrace or work through their resistances.”

But I haven’t written toward that sort of closure, so I’m going to resist any easy answers. I wasn’t the hero in those stories I told, and I don’t want to paint myself as one in this meta-narrative either. I think we tell our teaching stories as a way to simplify the messiness of a classroom; as Marguerite Helmers writes, “It is easy for us to become complacent about the ways we talk about students. . . . Facile labeling enables us to get on with the business of teaching” (98). I want to argue that perhaps this narrative discomfort is the point; our stories should lead us back into what is messy, unfinished, lacking a tidy resolution in teaching. We shouldn’t find it so easy to tell these stories and dismiss these troubling moments. So what I am left with is these unfinished stories, some speculations, and even
more questions about what it means to be resistant and how we represent this experience to ourselves, to our students, and to each other.

Here’s the “what next” portion of my student stories.

Distance from those “resistant students” I knew—or was—in elementary and high school has changed my perceptions of them. I see them differently now: my lab partner’s parents couldn’t speak English; the foolish insurrections staged by my sixth grade class are sodden with our sense of loss and uncertainty (what did we think would happen if we had succeeded? That the substitute would run screaming from the building, never to darken our favorite teacher’s desk again, seems highly unlikely). Although I don’t see my verboten skirt-shortening as parallel to the likely learning disability Jonathon suffered, I do see a common thread: what looked like transparently “bad” behavior signified much more that went unrecognized. There was another story to be told. And the efforts to control the symptoms of resistance seem to have solved little in the end.

While I now have greater sympathy for my former teachers, I also see why it was so important to resist and why the consequences mattered so little. At the same time, I’m haunted by the gap between who I was then and how I see my own students now. I’m left trying to mediate these versions of myself and struggling to tell these stories that used to seem so easy, chastened by the knowledge that what looks like simple (even pointless) resistance often signifies a great deal more.

What if we told other kinds of resistance stories? Instead of those that rely on stock characters, demonize our students, and position us as beleaguered heroes, we might find fresh—and ultimately more useful—ways to talk about what happens in our classrooms. When I began this project, I thought that I could write myself out of using this metaphor of resistance, that I could find revolutionary ways of talking about the teacher-student relationship. In this I failed: the trope is more deeply rooted in my teaching-psyche than I could have imagined. It has helped me a great deal, however, to try to move beyond those definitions permeating our narratives that equate student resistance with blind opposition. In opening up the term “resistance” to consider how other metaphors—like its scientific applications or the romantic-political visions—can both inform and problematize my storytelling, I think I’ve become a better teacher, too. That is, understanding the science and the romance of resistance (particularly in self-representations) helps me to reconceptualize what is happening when I want to label—and dismiss—students as “just” resistant.

In The Call of Stories, Robert Coles quotes William Carlos Williams: “‘Their story, yours, mine, it’s what we all carry with us on this trip we take, and we owe it to each other to respect our stories and learn from them.’” Coles continues, “Such a respect for narrative, as everyone’s rock bottom capacity, but also as the universal gift, seems altogether fitting” (30). I think we may forget this, falling back on the other functions that teaching narratives may serve for us. I want
to argue that we can indeed learn from carefully-told narratives, particularly from the stories we rarely hear. For example, beyond problematizing our definitions of resistance, I suspect there is much to be learned from critical examinations of teaching success that mark a different kind of classroom resistance. (Perhaps it feels self-congratulatory or frivolous to reflect on these moments.) Likewise, I think there is a host of untold resistance stories we may be afraid to talk about. (Why, as Robert Yagelski’s “The Ambivalence of Reflection” asks of us, are there so few stories about the challenges of teaching graduate students?) What if we can teach ourselves new ways to understand the forces of resistance if we are, in Robert Coles’s words, willing to share this universal gift?

Further, I think we need to train ourselves to stop reading our teaching narratives primarily in terms of their patterns. While there is something tremendously comforting in the solidarity that emerges in shared experience (virtually every reader of this piece has commiserated over their own “Rob” or their unwilling peer responders) or in the feeling that a classroom situation is manageable because it is analogous to another, I think we miss a crucial opportunity. Reading the patterns of stories seems to me much like reading the first paragraph of Luisa’s paper on bulimia and photocopying the feedback I wrote for Jennifer, who suffers from an eating disorder. Both papers might indeed have similar issues—an initial lack of focus or an unsupported thesis about the media’s culpability or an overabundance of details about the daily struggles the young woman faced. How about DeShaun’s paper on gun control? I could just borrow the response my colleague thoughtfully composed for her student, particularly since I’ve had more than my share of papers like this one. Does this analogy make the problem clearer? Patterns are useful only insofar as they illuminate, but they can obscure our vision as well. Students and classroom moments become static, categorizable, reducible to their common denominator; they are no longer organic, living entities that are fundamentally unlike any other.

Finally, the “what next” portion of my teaching stories. In both, what changed most were my own perceptions. In writing these stories and listening to the responses of others, I have come to see these moments of resistance and the ways I tell the stories in new and hopefully deeper ways.

So what happened next is that I thought. A lot.
I thought about Rob’s behavior and my unfortunate, too-personal response to it. I thought about how much I resisted having conferences with him. I thought about the spoiled frat-boy niche I had put him into and how that had probably colored my perceptions of him. I thought about all the times I passed my classroom 10 or 15 minutes before class, and I would see him there, notebook out, reading his draft. I thought about how he’d described his previous writing experiences: assignments that seemed unconnected from his experience and knowledge, teacher comments that left him certain of his own inabilities. I thought about his respectful responses to other students’ writing, his careful
reading of my feedback to him, his quiet pride in his research paper. I tried to understand why his conference-self seemed so different from his classroom-self. And ultimately, I thought about all the ways I might be affecting Rob’s behavior and how I might be misreading him, too.

I’d like to say that I knew how to fix things with Rob and that the next week I asked the magic questions that smoothed out the rift between us, sparking a non-stop, generative conversation. I’d like to say I became Super-Teacher to his Wonder-Student. But in truth, I think we both endured the rest of the semester the best we could, carefully retreating from that one horribly revealing moment. Rob continued to try to do what I asked, even if that never seemed clear to him, even if he never seemed to completely trust me again. I tried to balance all that I knew about Rob the student, not Rob, a kind of student. To be a good teacher for Rob, I needed to change somehow, to find a new way to conceptualize the resistance between us productively and shift our relationship from one characterized by seemingly opposing forces to one where our energies were working together.

With my peer response protestors, I thought about their implicit demands: that I should change the way I ran things, give up some control, and match my classroom practice with the theories I espoused. I thought about the courage it must have taken to ask for change rather than to resent me and what I asked of them. I thought about how their resistance didn’t just disrupt a lesson plan; it shook my self-image as a “radical” teacher. I thought about how open resistance marked these students’ engagement and how I ultimately became a better teacher for it. And together with my students, I began to think about what made good peer feedback, as we experimented with different styles of responding.

In an earlier draft of this paper, I wrote that “even though we collaboratively negotiated how peer response would happen, collectively coming up with useful questions, leaving space for others, experimenting with different structures including self-selected groups, peer response did not radically transform itself.”

But that’s not entirely true either. I still find myself wanting to have a tidy ending (I did the radical-teacher thing of negotiating the syllabus and it didn’t work; I can safely go back to teaching in the way that was comfortable). It’s true that my students didn’t give each other the kind of feedback that I wanted them to give, that I thought they should want. I found it difficult to micro-manage when some groups chose to have a conversation about their drafts (what was I going to look at?!), others focused on heavy-duty editing (that should come only at the end!), and some students simply wanted metaphorical reader-responses. But my students did experience this as radically different. Not only did their revisions and final papers improve, they also identified peer feedback sessions as one of the strongest aspects of the class. Many told me that they set up similar groups with friends and dormmates for other papers. And their resistance led me to growing pains: I had to figure out how to fit their resistances into both my self-image as a teacher and a structured approach to teaching that I was certain “should” work.
Much as I wanted an easy answer for this teacher-tale, I can’t have it. So this contradiction should matter in my telling of this story, too.

Finally, I can now see I made a tremendous mistake in believing these stories of resistance were mine alone. What if I had asked my students for their stories of resistance? How might those conferences with Rob have gone differently had I asked him for his impressions of those weekly 15-minute sessions? How might those peer feedback sessions have changed if I had asked for my students’ input, rather than expecting they would simply accept the directives I gave them? I suspect neither situation would have escalated as they had. In responding as I did, believing it was my story to tell and my crisis to solve, I fostered the me-versus-them dynamic.

Readers have suggested to me that not every student has the capacity to articulate “the problem” with a particular class dynamic or to propose alternatives. Point well taken. But each student can tell you her story. And we are trained readers: we know how to listen for the gaps in an essay, to listen for what is not yet there, and what it can become. I believe we should apply this same skill to our students’ stories of resistance in the classroom to shift our combative, antagonistic stance into something more genuinely communicative. As Robert Coles reflects, this “rock bottom capacity” for narrative to be shared seems altogether fitting, particularly in the composition classroom. Although this is not the only solution, this has taken the form of “open letters” in my class, in which one can tell her story to the class and invite our anonymous responses; I re-present these to the whole class as a basis for discussion. This strategy is by no means perfect, as it is usually me who initiates these conversations, even when it appears that students are uncomfortable with some aspect of the class. On the other hand, it has helped me more successfully navigate—not avoid—the kinds of resistances I faced with Rob and with my peer responders.

NOTES

1 This work was supported (in part) by a grant from the City University of New York PSC-CUNY Research Award Program. I want to thank my colleagues, Kate Dionne and Pam Weisenberg. This paper grows out of numerous discussions with them, as well as several conference presentations in our search to understand the “everyday” student behaviors we saw in our classrooms. Our discussions were inflected by our readings of Robert Brooke’s “Underlife and Writing Instruction,” in which he speaks of student resistance (“underlife” behaviors: those that fall outside the proscribed limits placed on students) as a process of constructing identities—a drive to include more or alternate identities that aren’t allowed in the classroom.

I would also like to thank Michael Reda and Greg Tulonen for their help with this paper, as well as the various readers whose comments have pushed my
thinking further about both student resistance and the value of storytelling. Finally, I am grateful to my colleagues who have shared their stories of difficult classroom moments; hearing their stories has nurtured my interest in how we use such teaching narratives.

2 Joseph Trimmer’s *Narration and Knowledge: Tales of the Teaching Life*, Duane Roen, Stuart Brown, and Theresa Enos’s *Living Rhetoric and Composition*, and Richard Haswell and Min-Zhan Lu’s *Comp Tales* are narrative collections that attempt to look at issues in composition through a range of narrative forms. They suggest a growing disciplinary interest in narrative. *Comp Tales* is particularly interesting as each “tale” is followed by a brief commentary by the author, sections by an editorial comment, suggesting that the narratives can be (or should be?) read in a particular way.

**WORKS CITED**


FEAR, TEACHING COMPOSITION, AND STUDENTS’ DISCURSIVE CHOICES: RE-THINKING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN EMOTIONS AND COLLEGE STUDENT WRITING

A growing body of research has opened new possibilities for understanding how emotions affect the composing process. In the past, researchers across the disciplines have been discouraged by the fact that “emotion has simply seemed fraught with too many difficulties to be considered as a tractable topic of study” (Niedenthal 1003). In Composition Studies, many researchers assumed that emotions connected to students’ life situations and individual psychology, and could not be integrated into pedagogical practice (Richmond; McLeod “Some Thoughts”). Recent work in both the biological and social sciences has produced theories of embodied cognition (Damasio; Niedenthal), explorations of writing and healing (Pennebaker and Seagal; Pennebaker and Beall; Pennebaker et al.), and characterization of discourses associated with emotion (Jacobs and Micciche; Lutz and Abu-Lughod; Thorne and McLean). Composition researchers have established a corresponding body of work connecting emotion and writing (Brand; Brand and Graves; Jacobs and Micciche; McLeod, “Some”; McLeod, Notes; Perl; Murphy; Richmond; Welch; Worsham). These studies have become possible, in part, because of a shift in the perception of emotion. Within this new perspective, emotion, like other social interactions, is assumed to be “not only individually experienced, but also socially experienced and constructed” (Jacobs and Micciche 4); that is, emotion is understood as cultural rather than individual and biological, and instances of perceiving, responding to, expressing, and containing emotions are (unconsciously) enacted in terms of discursive forms evoked by specific contexts and conditions. This new approach provides a basis for studying emotions not as internal, idiosyncratic events, but as patterns that can be characterized and understood contextually.

As noted in Dale Jacobs and Laura Micciche’s essay collection, assuming that emotions are discursive opens up a new “way to move” for composition studies. The study of emotion as discourse not only eliminates objections about the individual psychology of students, it also connects researchers to methods that go beyond reflection and self-reporting. In the following analysis, I pursue these ideas within the context of a college composition course where students experienced a particularly high level of anxiety. I correlate formal characteristics of students’
final, reflective essays with findings from psychological studies of writing and healing, as well as with life-course development studies on subject positioning and discourse. This analysis suggests that writing assignments that press young adults toward critical thinking and identity shifts can evoke stressful emotions that, in turn, evoke discursive patterns inappropriate for the demands of critical, analytic writing. I focus on emotional as opposed to cognitive factors in students’ composing processes, and I pose a theory for how and why anxiety surrounding the writing process might lead to the clichés, generalizations, and pat conclusions so typical of beginning writers. I conclude by considering how re-thinking connections between emotional and written discourses can help instructors support students as they strive to meet expectations for college writing.

ANALYSIS OF STUDENT WRITING

Imagine this: it’s the first day of class your sophomore year in college and you’ve already sat through three other teachers go[ing] over their course syllabus and all you want to do is go home . . . so you sit quietly and wait for the teacher to start talking. When she does, one of the first things that comes out of her mouth is, “You will be tutoring other Wayne State students in the University’s Writing Center as a requirement for this class.” Now just think for a minute, what would be going through your head?

—From “Fear of Tutoring” by Emma, Fall 2002

Student writing in this essay comes from a writing practicum taught at Wayne State University in Detroit. As Director of the Writing Center, I taught one section of intermediate composition each term as a service-learning course connected to the Center. In theory, these sections were for students who wanted experience coaching student writers; in practice, students signed up randomly or because the course fit their schedule. Most students came to the first class meeting unaware of the tutoring requirement listed in the course description. In the fall of 2002, only a handful of the twenty or so students knew they would work as tutors; when I announced the requirement, they were visibly distressed. “Fear of tutoring” was an everyday presence in the classroom, and as I read and re-read student writing for this course I became increasingly convinced that fear influenced their writing in very concrete ways.

For their final assignment, students wrote a reflective analysis on what they learned about their own writing process while they worked at the Center. Emma’s paper, “The Fear of Tutoring,” is excerpted at the beginning of this section. Although her paper contained many elements of analysis, in general it unfolded as a story about how she overcame fears connected to her tutoring experiences. Most of Emma’s classmates wrote essays that were very similar in focus and form: conversion narratives describing what they learned about who
they were and how to interact with others. These lessons have a great deal to do with writing, but they did not reflect the requirements I thought I wrote into the assignment. Though the assignment sheet prompted students to analyze specific features of their writing and their writing process, the papers consisted of broad generalizations sprinkled with sharp (but very general) observations and the occasional section of analysis; they used few if any examples from their work to support their claims. Essays generally concluded with statements like these: “fear can cause you to change and learn” and “writing, like tutoring, is a process” and “it is OK to work with others.” As I read, I found myself thinking very hard indeed about what was going through students’ heads. I was especially curious why it was that when college composition courses focus on critical thinking, students continue to articulate their ideas in terms of clichés and conversion stories. I found myself wondering what these essays might suggest about writing and emotion, and whether we might need to re-think the teaching of writing in light of what recent research suggests about emotion and discourse.

Dawn Skorczewski’s analysis of clichés in student writing offers one answer to this line of thinking. She observes that even students who are able to engage in critical analysis are not able to “sustain a critical voice for very long in an essay and [end] up with a final paragraph that asserts the truth of such statements as ‘everybody can do it if they try,’ or ‘if we ask too many questions, society as we know it will fall apart’” (221). Skorczewski points out that essays that move from critical analysis to cliché bear “important similarities to the hybrid discourse Brian Street describes in his discussion of literacy acquisition . . . [where] students ‘frequently maintain a number of different literacies side by side, using them for different purposes’” (qtd. in Skorczewski 222). In the following analysis, I consider student essays not in terms of cognitive patterns associated with learning, but rather in terms of the social and emotional contexts surrounding their composition. I look at their writing as a “hybrid discourse” where emotional discourses influence and sometimes overwrite the academic patterns students seek to produce.

To prepare for work at the Center, students read selections from several tutoring handbooks, practiced peer tutoring with one another, conducted preliminary reading and writing for a research project, and observed experienced tutors as they worked with tutees. As I mentioned earlier, the final assignment for the course required students to write a reflective essay where they analyzed how their writing changed as a result of work at the Center. Students were prompted to consider how tutoring experiences influenced their processes for brainstorming, drafting, revising, proofreading, and so on. The structure of the assignment encouraged first person analysis, and most students structured their analysis as a conversion narrative. In the following discussion, I use an essay written by Ben, a student in his late teens, to illustrate the salient features of essays for this assignment. Throughout the discussion, I offer excerpts from other student essays to illustrate variations on Ben’s general patterns.
Essays generally opened with scenes similar to the arrival stories in ethnographic writing. As in ethnographic arrival stories, students used the introduction to characterize both a new setting and the self who would be changed within that setting. In the following paragraph, Ben describes what he was thinking and feeling as he waited for his first student.

When I got to the Writing Center I sat down and relaxed. I noticed everyone scattered about in no particular order. People were chattering about their papers and their on-going assignments. My heart rate was on the rise as I prepared for my appointment. My palms were a little wet and my mouth was starting to dry. What if I don’t know what to say or don’t know where to go with the session? I could easily lose track of my thoughts and get lost. I tried to shut these negative thoughts out of my mind as the appointment time grew closer.

Ben’s essay is representative in that it describes both an external and an internal setting. He describes an external physical place which is both slightly chaotic and seems to be operating within a predictable routine. He also describes his internal physical and emotional anxiety as he contemplates his responsibilities in the upcoming session. Even though different students noted different details of the physical context, the feelings remained very much the same: fear, anxiety, and suspenseful anticipation. Tiara, who wrote her research paper on the importance of making students feel comfortable during tutoring sessions, began her essay by stating, “The first day that I tutored was not a good day...” Similarly, Rob, a student who also focused his research project on setting students at ease, wrote, “My stomach started to turn as if my lunch had been poisoned.” And Laura, who was studying to be a physical therapist, wrote, “At first I was worried that I wouldn’t know what to say. After seeing other seasoned tutors in action I didn’t think I was up to par...” These introductions present an emotional landscape suffused with uncertainty and pervaded by feelings that the authors are unprepared for the responsibilities they are about to take on.

When Ben describes the session with his first student, he portrays himself as extremely uncomfortable, aware of his discomfort, and worrying that his discomfort will make the student feel uncomfortable as well. He writes, “As I read the paper, I took a quick glance up to feel out the student. He looked uncomfortable as most do. I couldn’t help but to be conscious of other people in the Center. The room is small enough so that anyone sitting anywhere can hear everything. This added to my anxiety and I’m sure it didn’t comfort the student.” Ben’s description remains focused on emotional interactions. His observations move back and forth between his feelings and his perception of the student’s feelings. In this paragraph we do not know what Ben reads in the student paper, only how he feels and how he thinks the student feels. His description of the setting reminds us that for students
and new tutors, writing centers are public spaces, and the fact that their talk will be public makes them feel even more anxious.

Documentation of the hyperawareness and anxiety associated with being in a new setting is a feature of more than two-thirds of the essays for this course. Ben and his classmates refer to the noisy, crowded, public nature of writing center sessions, and the discomfort of this setting. Tiara writes, “I was so nervous and there [were] so many things going on in the Center. . . . Not to mention that other students along with my teacher were watching me.” Tiara, like Ben, reasons that her discomfort will contribute to the discomfort of the students she works with. In these descriptions, students use a logic of empathy to explore the kind of learning that is taking place, both in themselves and in the student tutees. Focus and process are both strongly influenced by emotion, and students use observations about their feelings to create a kind of inductive analysis where emotional similarities suggest general cases. For example, both Ben and Tiara reason that their discomfort influences the feelings and performance of their student tutees, and while both tutors are committed to doing their best, they describe themselves as concerned that they will not be “up to par.”

In the same paragraph where Ben describes his discomfort with tutoring, he explains how tutoring led him to see his own writing differently. He states that while reading his student’s paper, Ben realized he has many writing issues in common with the student he is coaching. Ben writes, “In one particular paragraph I noticed a lot of redundancy of general ideas. It then hit me: I do this in my writing as well. I remembered that you should always start with a general statement and then use detailed examples to develop it. From reading his paper, I came to learn that I have a problem with this also.” Ben identifies this moment as a point where he realizes something important about his writing and about himself. The superficial realization is that he also ought to work on using detailed examples. The deep realization—which Ben develops in the rest of his paper—is that he has writing issues similar to the issues of students who come to the Center, and that he can learn through reflecting on their composing practices and on his own.

Ben’s classmates came to different realizations, but they generally articulated the point of conversion in similar language. Laura writes, “I learned a lot from this session . . . I found out. . . . by sitting down with another writer we can get feedback. This feedback tells us whether or not we are connecting with our audience.” Rob, the student-tutor whose lunch turned in his stomach, writes, “[that day] taught me some important things that have helped me grow as a writer . . . you cannot help those who do not want help. . . .” These points of conversion are similar in that the pivotal realization concerns the author’s willingness to re-imagine his or her relationship to writing and to become more open to trying new approaches. Just as Laura learns she has much to gain from feedback, Rob observes that to progress as writers, students must adopt new attitudes—and until they are willing to try new ideas, there will be no progress.
In these conversions, students characterize themselves as entering new perspectives by connecting to their student tutees. Both Rob and Ben indicate that their identity as a tutor framed this shift. That is, through efforts to help or direct their student tutees, they discovered a new perspective that then helped them to become better tutors and better writers. Their discoveries were realized through the emotional logic of the earlier sections; within this logic, realizations begin with empathetic identification where authors conclude, “these students are like me” (i.e., they are anxious, too), and then transform into closer identification where the author concludes, “I am like them.” As the essays draw to their conclusions, student-tutors move away from this empathetic connection by extending and generalizing what they learned in terms of abstract, reasoned language. For example, Laura writes, “I found out. . . . by sitting down with another writer we can get feedback. . . .” In this declaration she moves from being inside her uncertainty about her abilities as a tutor to a position which allows her to rationalize the discomfort of her tutoring experience in terms of benefits to writers in general.

Ben’s essay concludes with a similar move toward rationalized generalization. He writes, “I have realized that sometimes discomfort will force you to change the situation you are in and turn it around. . . . Through discussing things out loud I can better understand my thoughts and then apply [them] to my writing.” In this section, Ben implies a new, deeper understanding of how conversations that give voice to and unpack inarticulate thoughts can strengthen writing processes. In keeping with his focus on discomfort, he emphasizes the role of discomfort in instigating change. Though clearly derived from the detailed emotional scenes in the essay, the conclusion is very general, and the cause for his change in perspective remains embedded in his story. The emotions that made his hands sweat in the introduction are now rationalized as a surprisingly benign gear in the clockwork of emotional dynamics: fear helps you change, leading you to realizations that help you turn things around. At the same time, the essay offers little analysis as to how this transformation came about or how particular changes in his perspective affected his writing.

In concluding their essays, students generally offered simple resolutions to the fears they described. Laura’s realization that collaboration connects writers to an audience yielded the following conclusion: “Even though I might think things seem OK with my writing it can never hurt to have another person look it over and give feedback.” Christine, the student who connected her tutoring experience to a change in identity, wrote, “It took a while to figure out who I wanted to become as a tutor and a writer. But I have learned that tutoring is much like writing; it is a process that takes time to learn and for you to become successful you have to be willing to incorporate what you learn from other sessions and from people around you.” These overly general conclusions often contained surprisingly astute analysis of the author’s writing issues. For example, at the beginning of the term Ben had difficulty writing drafts; he planned his work in his head and subjected his ideas to intense editing and revising before putting them on paper. For the first several
assignments, freewriting seemed more frustrating than helpful and he was generally distressed during the planning stages. His reflective essay begins by stating the fear that he will not know what to say and that he will go off track during tutoring, an observation that connects to his acknowledged anxieties about drafting. At the point of conversion Ben states that he is similar to students who come to the Center, and that through working with tutees he can take part in practices that will strengthen his own writing process. These realizations played out as practical changes in his writing process. As he wrote his research project, he engaged in the brainstorming practices he worked on with tutees; he experimented with freewriting, made numerous lists and outlines, and wrote and rewrote sections of his work (though he did so primarily by finishing earlier sections before going on to the next). In light of these observations, Ben’s essay seems to reveal an implicit analysis of his development as a writer.

So while my initial appraisal that the essays focused on students’ emotional experiences remains true, upon more careful reading I found that their writing revealed a narrative analysis of their development as writers, which if it had been analytic and overt would have been much closer to what the assignment required. The following discussion considers why it might be so hard for students to engage the language of academic analysis, particularly when they are anxious or fearful as they develop their writing.

FEAR, IDENTITY, AND BECOMING A WRITER

Although the Writing Center practicum was an intermediate writing course, most students began the term with characteristics of beginning college writers. When asked to describe their composing process, most noted that they “sat down at the computer and wrote.” They also reported relying on formulaic patterns (paragraphs should be four to five sentences; short essays should have an introduction with the thesis stated in the last sentence, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion) rather than engaging in rhetorical analysis of purpose, audience, and form. At the same time, when asked to characterize themselves as writers, they indicated that they generally saw themselves as “fairly decent writers” and stated that they wanted to work primarily on grammar and proofreading.

These self-characterizations suggest that practicum students had not yet made an identity shift to novice writers, a shift which Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz describe as a crucial step in becoming successful college students. Sommers and Saltz describe novice writers as embracing an identity with “an open attitude to instruction and feedback, a willingness to experiment . . . and a faith that, with practice and guidance, the new expectations of college can be met”; they emphasize that becoming a novice writer is a fundamental reconceptualization of self, and point out that individuals who “cling to their old habits and formulas and who resent the uncertainty and humility of being a novice have a more difficult time adjusting to the demands of college writing” (134). Course readings, writing assignments, and
experiences at the Center all pressed students to make this shift. Conflicts between students’ self-perceptions and their struggles to master college writing certainly contributed to fears articulated in their reflective essays: fears associated with the implicit demand that they become novice writers.

Student fear and loss of confidence are perennial issues in composition classrooms. Because writing is bound to conceptions of self, pressure to change the way students write challenges the self engendered by the discourse marked for correction. As a result, students required to change the way they write often encounter intense internal conflict (DiPardo; Delpit and Dowdy; Smitherman; Tatum). In her work on feminisms’ implications for critical practice, Patti Lather quotes graduate student Kathy Fea’s definition of resistance: “a word for the fear, dislike, hesitance most people have about turning their entire lives upside down and watching everything they have ever learned disintegrate into lies” (76). Instructors who teach critical, social activist composition courses have expended much thought and writing on how to respond to fear that manifests as resistance. In classrooms where instructors practice critical pedagogy, fear and resistance have been documented as important factors in what and how students learn (Delpit and Dowdy; Chandler, “Reflective”; Chandler, “Some”; Hays). Although the practicum students in this analysis represent their fear in terms of work at the Writing Center, studies of identity and writing, critical pedagogies, and student resistance suggest that part of their fear may also derive from pressure to shift identity, a pressure common to most college composition courses.

While identity conflicts are highly personal and remain enmeshed in individual psychology and identity development (Herrington and Curtis, Tatum), this uniqueness does not preclude the possibility that anxiety might influence students to express those conflicts in predictable ways. In the next two sections, I describe findings on discursive patterns and emotions from research in writing and healing, life-course development, and narrative analysis studies. I then theorize how these discourses connect to essays from the writing practicum.

WRITING AND HEALING

Since the 1980s, researchers in psychology have documented how writing narratives about traumatic experiences has resulted in positive health effects. In a review of research on the psychological and physical health benefits of communication about emotions, J. W. Pennebaker et al report that improvements in health resulting from discussing experiences connected to trauma appear “to generalize across settings and several Western cultures” (Pennebaker, Zech, and Rimé 530). Such studies have been conducted within a wide range of circumstances and for diverse purposes. In most cases, experimental subjects wrote or talked about life traumas such as the death of a loved one, a life threatening experience, or severe illness. In studies involving writing, subjects who effectively coped with stress generally produced writing with specific characteristics: narratives were marked
by particular patterns for movement between emotion and reason, and authors positioned themselves in particular ways with respect to upsetting material.

The research emphasizes that not all forms of disclosure or sharing helped individuals resolve traumatic experiences. In particular, writing about factual aspects of an emotional episode did not affect health variables, while writing about emotional aspects did (see Pennebaker and Beall). More recent studies demonstrated that writing which resolved stress most effectively began by narrating emotional aspects of an experience but then moved toward a more reasoned or rational—reflective—perspective (Pennebaker and Seagal). Overall, writing which allowed participants to experience the most benefit had a narrative structure that moved from an emotional to a more reasoned stance, came to closure, and allowed the author to gain increased distance from upsetting events.

Because these studies were designed to explore the health effects of writing, they cannot be expected to provide direct answers to questions about why student essays tend toward clichés and conversion narratives. At the same time, writing practicum essays consistently began with emotion-laden descriptions, concluded with reasoned generalizations, and shared striking similarities with forms identified by psychological researchers as producing effective relief from stress. Because practicum essays were produced through a series of drafts where the reasoned conclusions often were produced more than a week after the emotion-based descriptions, student composing processes were in many ways similar to processes under the experimental conditions, where subjects were required to write about the same experience for a certain amount of time over a period of days. These parallels between practicum essays and stress-relieving patterns for communication suggest that writing courses where students write about stressful situations or issues related to the course may unintentionally set up students to compose essays in forms for relieving stress.

This analysis does not equate “fear of tutoring” with trauma; student fears are not the same as near-death experiences, illness, and loss of loved ones. The feelings evoked by these very different events are not the same as feelings surrounding student writing. What makes studies of writing and healing relevant to college composition is that they suggest that communicating in a particular form can provide individuals with quantifiable relief from stressful feelings. The research further reports that both writing and talk—where subjects make a cognitive shift from preliminary emotional exploration to more distanced, rational conclusions—can provide psychological and physical relief from symptoms of stress. This suggests that individuals who have experienced relief from stress, either through talk or writing in the described patterns, may (unconsciously) resort to those patterns in future situations where they encounter stress. If this is so, then some number of students in any stress-inducing writing course may feel an unconscious tug to write in forms that previously helped them to feel better.

The research emphasizes that to relieve stress effectively, communication is needed to explore the emotions that produced the upsetting feelings before moving
toward a more distanced, rational perspective. Writing from a distanced perspective from the outset and/or leaving emotions unresolved (e.g., not reaching a conclusion or closure) did not provide effective relief from stress. With respect to students in composition courses, particularly courses which challenge previously unexamined beliefs, these findings suggest that students may experience conflict between the unconscious drive to relieve stressful feelings and the demands of critical, analytic writing assignments that ask them to step outside emotionally driven assumptions, defer resolution, consider perspectives different from their own, or to allow that some questions cannot be answered. Logically, the intensity of stress in a given composition classroom would seem to be a factor in whether or to what degree students will be capable of resisting the comfort and relief of clichéd, generalized narratives. If anxiety can induce an impulse to contain unresolved feelings, and research indicates that it can, then courses which challenge student identities and beliefs may create a need for students to compose personal, emotional essays with coherent, rationalized conclusions, regardless of the assignment.

**LIFE-COURSE DEVELOPMENT, THE IMPULSE TO CREATE COHERENCE, AND POSITIONING**

Studies from life-course development also predict that when students in late adolescence and young adulthood are pressed toward critical reflection and analysis, they will be drawn to reply in terms of conversion stories and clichés. According to Dan McAdams, studies beginning in the mid-1980s identified late adolescence and young adulthood as the point in life when humans begin to craft autobiographical stories to define who they are; the ages from 15 to 25 mark a particularly rich period for memories of particular events used in the construction of identity stories. Prior to adolescence, individuals have not acquired the multiple and varied cognitive tools necessary to construct the kinds of integrative life stories that can explain the self both “synchronically and diachronically, explaining why it is that I am sullen with my father and euphoric with my friends and how it happened—step by step, scene by scene—that I went from being a born-again Christian who loved baseball to an agnostic socialist” (McAdams 190). Traditional college students are at a point in their lives where part of their age-related, developmental work is to develop internal narratives to explain who they are and who they are becoming. Conversion stories are one pervasive, cultural form well suited to exactly the kind of identity construction particular to late adolescence.

In addition, work by McAdams and others suggests this developmental point is also the place where individuals begin to reckon the revisions, contradictions, and idiosyncratic twists life stories inevitably embody. Generally, the college years are a time when students begin a cognitive shift away from the “dichotomous, rigid, or conventional stances toward knowledge and learning” that they bring from high school (Hays 154). In her discussion of developmental features of student writing, Janice Hays points out that “left to their own devises, [dualistic thinkers] tend . . . to make flat, unqualified, and unsupported statements; they do little elaborating either
of their assertions or on the [supporting] evidence. . . . Their uncoached writing contains an abundance of absolutes . . . general word choices, and heavy reliance on slogans, clichés, and commonplaces” (168). So, it seems college writers are posed to make two interrelated shifts in identity—the shift to novice writer described by Sommers and Saltz, and a shift to a more complex level of cognitive functioning. Conversion stories describe a shift in perspective, but because they are narratives (as opposed to analysis), they do not necessarily require that the narrator identify and describe dynamics that drive the shift. In other words, conversion narratives allow students to engage in a level of analysis suited to their present cognitive patterns for analysis that can position them in a new perspective—one that recognizes the validity of more critical, reflective analysis. Perhaps more importantly, and as shown in the following discussion, conversion narratives meet students’ emotional needs for negotiating identity shifts more effectively than do critical analyses.

Practicum essays generally describe conversion to a position where learning is about the collaborative, interactive creation of knowledge; at the same time, events are set forward from “masterful” subject positions. That is, while students document shifts to new identities where they value interactions among multiple perspectives, they tend to represent this shift in terms of a script that preserves a single perspective that reaches closure with respect to correctness. Use of this familiar script allows students engaged in the risky business of identity work to preserve a sense of coherence and certainty within a new cognitive terrain.

Avril Thorne and Kate McLean’s work on narrators’ positioning within cultural stories can further deepen our understanding of students’ preference for conversion stories. Thorne and McLean found evidence that narratives with clear, unreflective conclusions are culturally-supported master narratives for late adolescents in European-American culture. They also found that authors who couched stories within forms identified as dominant narratives received the validation and support generally accorded to master narratives. Thorne and McLean gathered data by inviting adolescents to recall self-defining stories. The majority of stories concerned “either relationship events (often conflicts with parents or peers) or life-threatening events” (173). The study focused on life-threatening events because evidence from other research indicated that “reactions to traumatic events showed an urgency to explain the cause of the event” (174). Thorne and McLean’s focus makes a good match for understanding the Writing Center essays, since both sets of stories press narrators to explain or rationalize feelings associated with an upsetting event.

Thorne and McLean collected written accounts of traumatic events along with “telling-narratives,” stories in which subjects described contexts for the stories’ narration, including how the stories were told and how they were received. Researchers identified three positions within the telling contexts: [1] the John Wayne [JW], where the teller presents a self that is tough and well able to handle the situation; [2] the Florence Nightingale [FN], where the teller describes a self that is aware and responsive to the needs of others; and [3] the Vulnerable,
where the teller focuses on his or her own “fear, sadness, and/or helplessness” (175). Findings indicated that

audiences were more willing to accept traumatic positions of toughness or concern for the feelings of others than positions of raw vulnerability—unmitigated fear or sadness. Based on their greater likelihood of being accepted by audiences, we speculate that for this sample of European-American college students, John Wayne and Florence Nightingale positions constituted culturally dominant narratives and Vulnerable positions did not. . . A number of informants commented that listeners do not know how to respond to feelings of fear and sadness, suggesting that there is no general script for managing vulnerability in this sample of late adolescents. (181-82)

In other words, some late adolescents bring to their composing process an internalized expectation that stepping outside dominant cultural scripts for relating distressing events will result in a lack of audience response or even in audience withdrawal.

Thorne and McLean’s research further suggests that students’ real-world discursive experience can condition them to expect that communications which do not provide resolution of upsetting feelings will position them for rejection and disconnection. Vulnerability positions report events without providing the resolution and coherence offered by the JW and FN positions. Thus while vulnerability narratives may be more suited to critical analysis, adolescent authors will not perceive them as eliciting the validation and support they may be in need of. When students feel uncertain in their identities, resorting to dominant discursive forms may be an unconscious strategy to ensure that their stories will elicit the supportive reception they need to participate in the risky work of shifting identities and beliefs.

WAYS TO MOVE: RE-THINKING EMOTION AND COLLEGE STUDENT WRITING

Accepting emotion as “not only individually experienced, but also socially experienced and constructed” suggests that we must read student compositions as the product of multiple discourses: home discourses students bring to their writing, the particular version of academic discourse demanded by the assignment, and the emotional discourse evoked by the context(s) for composing, to name a few. These multiple discourses may, as observed by Street, result in a “hybrid discourse” such that characterizations of discursive patterns associated with particular emotions can help instructors identify subsets of particular emotional contributions to form and content. Analysis of the practicum essays provided one instance of how discursive patterns surrounding fear might inform our understanding of student writing. In this last section I take a more in-depth look at how understanding emotion as discourse casts both writing and teaching in a new light

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The pervasive influence of psychoanalysis has long since convinced most composition instructors, as well as the public at large, that writing has an unconscious component, and that an author’s meanings are both intentional and beyond the author’s conscious design. Once emotion is defined as culturally determined and socially constructed, choices about discursive form—similar to choices about content—will have an unconscious component. Discourses are enacted and therefore available for observation and analysis, but they are also characterized as internalized and therefore contextually rather than consciously evoked. As a result, choices about discursive forms for writing will be both artful and intentional, as well as unplanned, unconscious, and connected to contextual cues writers may be unaware of. Within this paradigm, instructors must reconceptualize exactly what kind of learning tasks students face as they enter emotion-laden contexts where they explore new identities, experiment with new ideologies, and patch together new forms for representation.

When engaged in writing associated with intense emotion, students may find themselves in a double bind. Assignments that press students to re-think long-held identities or beliefs induce discomfort, fear, and sometimes anger. Research on writing and healing, and on adolescent subject positioning, characterizes discursive forms that enable students to survey and contain these frightening feelings as grounded in an emotionally-mediated logic and patterns for overly general resolution. In other words, assignments that simultaneously press for critical thinking and identity shifts can evoke emotions that in turn evoke discursive patterns that will not satisfy the demands of the assignment. In such situations students may find themselves drawn toward two conflicting discursive forms. At a conscious level they will know that they need to write objective, analytic academic prose that poses open questions and takes a balanced approach to exploring resolution; but at the unconscious level, they may feel the need for emotional exploration not only of the subject matter but of the self, for rationalized closure of the issues at hand, and for a sense of mastery over the material.

The fact that college students often claim to understand or to have mastered concepts or skills that their writing does not demonstrate is one predictable outcome of this tension between what students know with their minds and what their emotions may cause them to write. As Sommers and Saltz observe, “significant changes in students’ attitudes toward writing do not necessarily correspond to changes in the writing itself” (144). They point out that such gaps between “what a student knows about writing and what the student can actually do” occur during all four years at college (144). Because assuming a new personae or discursive position is significantly more threatening than stating a new idea, even when students understand new ideas and patterns for writing, they may not be able to step into the discursive patterns they cognitively embrace.

Double binds arising from conflict between emotional and cognitive discourses may affect composing in many more ways than we have yet imagined. For example, my earlier work studying discourse and conflict indicates that when
individuals perceive themselves as marginalized or out of power, they tend to become more deeply invested in home discourse rather than adopting the discourse of power (Chandler, “Some”). Even though this move can isolate and further disempower marginalized individuals, the confidence and emotional security experienced within home discourse presumably overwrites the more reasoned choice of adopting dominant forms to engage powerful opponents on their own terms.

This discussion suggests that we cannot teach students academic discourse, at least not in the conventional sense of giving examples or providing directions for what to do. Rather, this discussion suggests that we need to orchestrate emotional contexts that evoke and scaffold the discourses we seek to teach. Then and only then, after students are in an emotional place where unconscious discursive needs do not sabotage their efforts, instructors might orchestrate interactive reflection to help students examine changes in their writing patterns in light of relationships between discourse and emotion. While facilitated reflection will not necessarily assure new discursive patterns, it can set up a process for students to begin to theorize their composing process in ways that can help them bring those theories to new contexts for writing.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many if not most student research papers for the writing practicum focused on how composition instructors might support students in moving beyond fear and its consequences for composing. Rob wrote about how creating trust and connection with student tutees was crucial to effective tutoring; Emma wrote about the importance of addressing concerns and anxieties students bring to sessions, even when those concerns seem to have little to do with writing issues; Tiara wrote that tutors who really want their students to learn “have to take a risk and/or responsibility and help that student feel more comfortable.” Student researchers’ notes from tutoring observations documented that successful sessions resulted when tutors made a personal connection that enabled them to provide both reassurance and direction for their students. These same notes described effective reassurance as deriving from moves to draw attention to writers’ strengths or to acknowledge that many writers (including the tutors themselves) have difficulties similar to the tutees’. These moves were most effective when presented in the form of interactive discussion that encouraged students to take the initiative.

Many composition researchers have reached similar conclusions about how best to support student writers. Hays’s work on developmental feminist pedagogies, DiPardo’s study of Writing Center work and a cultural outsider, and Delpit and Dowdy’s work on nonstandard English speakers all make clear that effective pedagogies teach to students’ affective as well as their cognitive positions. Such research suggests that a sine qua non for effective teaching is for students to feel comfortable enough to let go of discursive patterns that function as psychological defense. Once students feel comfortable, instructors can help them reflect on connections between emotional positioning and writing in ways that can set up less traumatic transitions between discourses. By creating learning contexts to address
learners’ emotions and thereby lessening defense, instructors can help students make more conscious and therefore more powerful composing choices.

This essay provides one example of how instructors might gather, analyze, and theorize information on emotion and composing. In the analytic method set forward here, formal characteristics of student writing were checked against emerging characterizations of affective discourses reported in studies of emotion, identity, discourse, and communication. To understand student writing in terms of research findings, essays were then read as hybrids of emotional and cognitive discourses and analyzed in terms of the classroom contexts that shaped them. The usefulness of findings from this approach suggest a corresponding usefulness in re-thinking writing not as a product, or even as a process, but rather as a complex intersection of discourses—including emotional discourses—that orchestrate what and how we will compose within a given context. To realize the full theoretical possibilities of what we might discover within this perspective, we will need more nuanced study of emotional contexts for composing, fuller characterizations of emotional discourses, and detailed explorations of how emotional discourses shape written products and processes.

As pointed out in detail by composition researchers who study emotion and writing, there is a wealth of relevant research from other disciplines (see particularly Richmond). In addition to research from “psychology, cultural anthropology, feminism, political theory, critical pedagogy, and theories of social change” (Jacobs and Micciche 4), the analysis in this essay suggests that attention to work from interdisciplinary studies in life-course development, writing and healing, narrative and identity, and autobiographical memory will be particularly relevant to understanding emotion and discourse. Current work in neurology and psychology is also opening up new ways to think about how emotion and social conventions affect patterns for communication. Re-thinking previously discredited theories of emotion that have been re-invented through psychology’s “affective revolution” or applying new information from recent work on neurology and embodied emotion to patterns we observe in our classrooms are two of many possible opportunities presented by a body of work that increasingly points to the importance of emotion in thinking, learning, and communicating (Niedenthal; Haidt).

No matter how much information other disciplines might contribute to composition studies, we need more work to characterize affective contexts for teaching and composing and the associated patterns for writing and learning. We need more book-length, in-depth work similar to Anne Herrington and Martha Curtis’ Persons in Progress and Susan McLeod’s Notes on the Heart, as well as studies that include increased, more tightly focused analysis of correlations between writing and emotional contexts for composition. Studies with particular attention to classroom dynamics and composing processes would be especially valuable. Also, as initiated in A Way to Move, we need more work to theorize emotional politics: in English departments and in the many, diverse institutions which house them, in the texts that structure our teaching of writing, and in the discourses we...
encourage and discourage in our classrooms (see for example Bean; Gillam; Kerr; Moon; Ryden). Finally, in order to make effective use of what research may tell us about emotions and discourse, we will need to explore and reflect on our own implication in the discourses we seek to teach.

**Works Cited**


Peer Review from the Students’ Perspective: Invaluable or Invalid?

Peer review is well established as an important theoretical component of the writing process. Early practitioners of process writing such as Peter Elbow, Kenneth Bruffee, Donald Murray, and Anne Ruggles Gere studied, discussed, published, and lived collaborative learning at a time when the “chalk and talk” lecture routine was standard throughout higher education. Thanks to their vision, the process of having students critique each other’s papers has become commonplace in the composition classroom and in English composition textbooks. According to one survey, experienced instructors believe that all new teachers of composition should use peer review to at least some extent (Belcher 109). Although the emphasis on decentralizing the role of teacher once made peer review a cutting edge, progressive activity, it is now as entrenched as the old routine of lecture, write, and correct. Yet we frequently hear students complain bitterly that peer review is a waste of time or blame their peers for not “catching all the mistakes.” We also hear colleagues grumble that students’ papers are poor in quality and that students do not stay on task during the peer review process. While such behaviors and responses do not support the theory, they are a reality in many educational settings.

Only a few instances of empirical research examine what the students themselves think of their participation in peer review. Perhaps because peer response is practically instinctive to those of us who teach writing, few have felt the need to study the student perspective. Instead, studies have focused on the quality of peer comments, their effect on the revision process, and the best methods for conducting peer review. A few studies have indeed examined student attitudes (see Asraf; Murau; McGroarty and Zhu), but within the last decade, in particular, these studies have focused on second-language (L2) writers. Such focus provides valuable insight for both first-language (L1) and L2 teachers, but an examination of specifically L1 environments provides a useful comparison to L2 studies.¹ This lack of knowledge of student perception of the peer review process coupled with a concern about the difficulties inherent in group work motivated this study. In the remainder of this article, we report the results of faculty and student surveys from one university as a way of revisiting peer review and its value to the writing process.
A Review of Peer-Review Research

Despite some continuing romantic emphasis on the solitary author, most composition scholars have established quite firmly that the composing process is social, and peer review is an integral part of that process. According to Bruffee, learning to write is not only a matter of knowing the elements of composition, but also involves the student’s acculturation into the collegiate, educated world—a process vital to the student’s ability to succeed (Collaborative 9). Arguing from a historical perspective, Gere asserts that, among other things, writing groups can help students overcome the alienation that occurs when writers create work that does not have an audience. Those who write solely “for the teacher” will find it difficult to predict their audience needs, which will increase their sense of isolation (10). Viewing writing as a social-interactive phenomenon, Martin Nystrand posits that “meaning is a social construct negotiated by writer and reader through the medium of text” (78). Robert Brooke notes the importance of peer audiences when he defines the goals of writing groups as helping each student to “understand the ways in which writing can be useful in many areas of one’s life, as well as to have experiences which adapt writing to any of those uses” (9).

Many teachers, however, find that establishing a productive community of collaborative writers is anything but easy. As one faculty member notes, “It doesn’t save me time” (qtd. Belcher 107). The sheer number of essays devoted to explaining how to conduct peer reviews attests to its complexity and required commitment. Although group work has found widespread acceptance, even Bruffee admits that “institutionalized educational collaboration in whatever form . . . is never unproblematical” (“Collaborative” 14). Hephzibah Roskelly asserts that collaborative groups in writing classrooms experience a conflict in aims: socializing, working toward “being let into the ‘academic club,’” and criticizing, “transforming structures by asserting the value of those without membership” (124). John Trimbur, himself an advocate of process writing, urges us to remember that we cannot eliminate power structures from writing groups, and therefore theories of collaboration must grapple with the fact that writing groups have the potential to reinforce conformity rather than negotiate new meaning.

Just as the theoretical perspectives acknowledge the complexity of peer review, practitioner advice is likewise varied. For example, Fiona Paton provides a list of peer review guidelines that includes critiquing a model paper and creating a new peer review checklist for each rhetorical task (294). Working from a different pedagogical stance, Jetta Hansen and Jun Liu suggest scaffolding the peer review process by modeling a paper through three steps: critical reading, suggesting revisions, and revising (35). Lisa Cahill extends this scaffolding by emphasizing collaboration at every step of the writing process, including involving students in creating peer review sheets. Susan Miller recommends involving the teacher directly in the process by having conferences with groups of four students at a time. In fact, there are probably as many different ways to conduct peer review as...
there are instructors to conduct it; the question then becomes, what elements of peer review must gain pedagogical priority?

To answer this question, in part, we turn to the scholarship of L2 peer review. Studies that measure students’ attitudes toward peer review are more frequent in L2 than L1 environments, but findings sometimes are based on mixed groups or are otherwise applicable to the L1 experience. For example, Andrea Murau found that both L1 and L2 students had mixed feelings about peer review, and several of those surveyed (up to 20%) would not participate in peer review if it were not required—even though they found it helpful. This survey also found that L2 students experienced a high degree of anxiety during the peer review process while L1 students felt more comfortable (73). In addition, Ratnawati Asraf’s study of L2 first-year writers indicates that students see the value of peer review, but often give poor advice to their peers; thus, Asraf concludes that peer review may be most useful to writers who are proficient in the language (unless less proficient writers are given constant teacher oversight). Conversely, in their survey of L2 writers, Olga Villamil and Maria C. M. de Guerrero found that “[m]ost changes were incorporated” and were “95% correct” or in line with the professors’ comments. Mark Simkin and Nari K. Ramarapu also discovered that computer science students trust peers to the extent that the majority of them are comfortable with the practice of peer rating, in which other students grade their term papers (256).

Such conflicting results lead us to question the effectiveness of peer review and student perceptions of it. To that end, we designed this study to measure whether and how peer review is used and valued in writing classrooms. We began with several key questions:

1. Does the frequency of peer review relate to perceived value of peer review for students and writing faculty?
2. Does the perceived value of peer review relate to the use of required and/or optional peer review?
3. Does student self-confidence in peer review relate to perceived value of peer review?
4. Does student self-confidence in peer review relate to perceived instruction in peer review?
5. Does perceived value of peer review relate to instruction in peer review, for both students and writing faculty?

**METHODS**

This study was conducted at a private master’s-level comprehensive university in the southeastern United States. The university core curriculum includes a first year course sequence, Communication Arts I and II, which
emphasizes both writing and speech (unlike more traditional first-year writing courses). Students are also required to take two upper-level writing-intensive courses; most students complete this requirement through courses in their major. These discipline-specific writing-intensive courses are regularly reviewed as part of the university’s writing across the curriculum program. Peer review is encouraged at all levels of writing-intensive courses. Data was gathered during the spring semester to ensure that most students had completed at least one writing course at the university. We conducted the study near the end of the semester when most courses require lengthy paper assignments; we felt the timing would ensure that students had a rich writing experience that would be fresh in their minds.

This particular university provides an appropriate location for this study, at least in part because of its homogenous population, which supports greater confidence in the study results. The university is certainly working to increase campus diversity, but the profile is typical of many private institutions: largely white, middle-class, suburban, with selective enrollment. Approximately 65% of incoming students are female; 35%, male. We asked 72 faculty members who teach either the first-year Communication Arts courses or upper-level writing-intensive courses to participate in the study; of the 22 faculty respondents (30.5% response rate) who completed the survey, 19 self-identified as white and three abstained from providing any demographic data. Nine respondents were male; 10 were female. The faculty respondents represent 11 disciplines, although eight claimed English or “core” as their disciplines. We asked the writing faculty who agreed to participate in the study to survey their students.

Judging from average enrollments in the first-year and upper-level writing-intensive courses, we estimate that 1,296 students were asked to take the survey. We received responses from 328 students (25% response rate). The number of faculty and student survey responses is in keeping with our average 1:15 faculty-to-student ratio in our writing courses. Thus, while the overall response rate is low, the per class response rate is strong (approximately 82%). Of the 328 student respondents, 208 (63%) were female; 103 (31%) were male. Seventeen respondents did not provide demographic data. This female-to-male ratio is consistent with the university’s student body. Also in keeping with the university’s overall demographic, 276 (84%) student respondents self-identified as white. The university has a small group of minority students, and this limited diversity is reflected in the study: 3.4% self-identify as African American, 1.8% as other, less than 1% as either Asian or Latina. Approximately 9% chose not to indicate ethnicity. That said, the students represent a fairly even spread across 30 majors and concentrations, with only 12.8% undeclared. Business was the largest declared concentration, with 40 (12.2%).

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RESULTS

The aggregate averages from the course evaluation results (see Table 1) suggest that peer review is used in most of the university’s first year writing classrooms, but most students find peer review “not very helpful.” The numbers improve when averages for individual class sections are combined. The section averages indicate that peer review is used “usually” to “always” in the first year writing courses and that students find them “somewhat helpful.”

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Question &amp; Response</th>
<th>Aggregate Average</th>
<th>Section Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How often was peer review used in your class?</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>1.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How helpful was peer review in revising your paper?</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>2.37</td>
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Table 1. Questions from First-Year Course Evaluations (n=27 sections)

According to the frequency counts and percentages in the faculty survey (see Table 2), most faculty (73%) claim to use peer review in their classrooms either “usually” or “always.” This result is consistent with their view that peer review is a valuable part of the writing process (mean=3.77 on a 5-point scale) and their belief that peer review improves student writing (mean=3.45 on a 5-point scale). Similarly, most faculty require students to complete some form of peer review (72.7% require in-class peer review; 36.4% require out-of-class) and spend at least some class time preparing students to review each others’ papers. This preparation seems to take the form of lecturing (50%), demonstrating “good peer reviews” through paper sharing (36.4%), and providing students with handouts (40.9%). Faculty consensus seems to break down over how often to assess peer review; however, there is a significant correlation between how much faculty value peer review as part of the writing process and how frequently they choose to assess it (Pearson’s $r = .001$).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How often do you use peer review in your courses?</td>
<td>1. Never (0); 2. Seldom (4 / 18.2%); 3. Occasionally (2 / 9.1%); 4. Usually (7 / 31.8%); 5. Always (9 / 40.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer review is a valuable part of the writing process.</td>
<td>1. Disagree to 5. Agree (range= 2-5; mean=3.77; SD=.922)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer review improves the quality of student writing.</td>
<td>1. Disagree to 5. Agree (range=2-5; mean=3.45; SD=.800)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What types of peer review do you use? (select all that apply)</td>
<td>1. Required in-class peer review (16 / 72.7%); 2. Required out-of-class peer review (8 / 36.4%); 3. Encouraged students to ask friends to review papers (6 / 27.3%); 4. Encouraged students to visit Communication Resource Center (13 / 59.1%); 5. Other (5/ 22.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How much time to you spend preparing students for peer review?</td>
<td>1. None (1 / 4.5%); 2. Less than half a class (17 / 77.3%); 3. More than half a class (4 / 18.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you teach peer review? (select all that apply)</td>
<td>1. I give no formal instruction in peer reviewing (3 / 13.6%); 2. I give students a handout on how to peer review (9 / 40.9%); 3. I lecture on how to peer review (11 / 50%); 4. I use role play to demonstrate how to peer review (3 / 13.6%); 5. I share a paper and demonstrate good peer review (8 / 36.4%); 6. Other (5 / 22.7%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Faculty Survey Results

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Approximately two-thirds of student respondents reported that they used peer review for more than half of their major writing assignments and found peer review either “occasionally” or “usually” helpful in revising their papers (see Table 3). This finding held across academic rank and discipline. For most students (some 80%), peer review was required. Importantly, most students prefer some form of peer review: only 7.3% preferred not to participate in peer review \( \chi^2 (4, n=328) = 20.988, p = .000 \). Student preferences for type of peer review vary, with “required peer review” and “friend or family member” receiving the most responses. Only one-third of the student respondents see value in in-class peer review, which is how peer review is generally practiced in this university’s first year composition classes, and only 16% want to seek assistance from the university’s resource center. Most students are at least somewhat confident in their ability to review peers’ papers and are taught to conduct peer review by handouts and lectures. (There were no significant differences between responses from males and females.)

The results indicate that frequency of peer review as part of producing major writing assignments relates positively to perceived value of peer review for students \( \chi^2 (18, n=328) = 142.290, p = .000 \). In other words, when students participated in peer review for most or all of their major writing assignments, they were more likely to consider peer review as “usually” to “always” helpful. Similarly, perceived value of peer review for students correlates positively with required in-class peer review \( \chi^2 (5, n=328) = 20.156, p = .001 \). Requiring students to complete in-class peer reviews seems to encourage them to view peer review as more important or more helpful. While seemingly at odds with students’ dislike of in-class peer review, this correlation is consistent with the finding that students who reported more preparation, in terms of methods—in how to peer review—also valued peer review more \( \chi^2 (4, n=312) = 10.361, p = .035 \). Specifically, students who were prepared to carry out peer review through two or more teaching methods (e.g., handout, lecture, and paper demonstration) were more likely to find peer review helpful.

These positive impressions of peer review seem to be enhanced by student self-confidence in their ability to peer review. Students who are more confident in their ability to review peers’ papers also value peer review as an important part of the writing process \( \chi^2 (4, n=318) = 15.443, p = .004 \). Not surprisingly, students who receive more instruction in how to peer review are more confident in their ability to review others’ papers. Students who reported that instructors used two or more methods in teaching the process of peer review also reported more confidence in their ability to peer review \( \chi^2 (4, n=322) = 15.575, p = .004 \). Attempts to correlate specific pedagogical methods for peer review with student confidence were unsuccessful with this sample size.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How often do you use peer review as a part of producing major writing assignments in your course?</td>
<td>1. Never (42 / 12.8%); 2. With less than half of the major writing assignments (81 / 24.7%); 3. With more than half of the major writing assignments (68 / 20.7%); 4. With all major writing assignments (137 / 41.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If peer review is used in class, how helpful is peer review in revising your paper?</td>
<td>1. Not helpful at all (15 / 4.6%); 2. Seldom helpful (59 / 18%); 3. Occasionally helpful (102 / 31.1%); 4. Usually helpful (107 / 32.6%); 5. Always helpful (35 / 10.7%). Note that n=10 (3%) did not respond to this question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What type(s) of peer review do you use? (select all that apply)</td>
<td>1. I participate in required in-class peer review (264 / 80.5%); 2. I participate in required out-of-class peer review (98 / 29.9%); 3. I ask classmates to peer review even when it is not required (67 / 20.4%); 4. I ask a friend or family member to review my papers (159 / 48.5%); 5. I go to the Communication Resource Center for peer review (69 / 21%); 6. Other (8 / 2.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which type of peer review do you prefer?</td>
<td>1. required in-class peer review (111 / 33.8%); 2. required out-of-class peer review (33 / 10.1%); 3. to ask classmates to peer review even when it is not required (37 / 11.3%); 4. to ask a friend or family member to review my papers (122 / 37.2%); 5. to go to the Communication Resource Center for peer review (54 / 16.5%); 6. (other) (13 / 4%); 7. not to have my papers peer reviewed (24 / 7.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am confident of my ability to review a peer’s paper.</td>
<td>1. Never (10 / 3%); 2. Seldom (89 / 27.1%); 3. Occasionally (66 / 20.1%); 4. Usually (165 / 50.3%); 5. Always (64 / 19.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How have you been prepared to review a peer’s paper? (select all that apply)</td>
<td>1. I have had no formal instruction in peer reviewing (90 / 27.4%); 2. I was given a handout on how to peer review (137 / 41.8%); 3. I listened to a lecture on how to peer review (107 / 32.6%); 4. I watched / participated in role play of peer review (44 / 13.4%); 5. I was given a paper that demonstrated good peer review (71 / 21.6%); 6. Other (34 / 10.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other thoughts or comments.</td>
<td>160 / 48.8% responded.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Student Survey Results
The final question on the student survey was *What other thoughts or comments do you have about peer review?* Of the 328 students who completed the surveys, 160 (49%) chose to respond. Of these 160 comments, 92 (57.5%) expressed positive impressions about peer review, and 66 (41.3%) were negative. Comments such as *Very helpful in getting input other than my own!* were coded as positive, while comments such as *Peers never seemed to be willing to be open and give honest feedback* were coded as negative. Two comments could not be coded as positive or negative: (1) *There was a big emphasis on it freshmen year but I haven’t done it since then* and (2) *I would have liked to have gotten more instruction on how to peer review. That way I would be more confident in my peer reviewing skills and the skills that other students in the class had.* While the second comment could be construed as leaning toward positive, we decided that it did not fit the spirit of the other comments we had coded as positive.

In addition to coding the free-response comments as positive or negative, we also coded for topics that emerged from the data, specifically (1) busywork, notions that peer review was a waste of time or simply “free days”; (2) reviewer dependent, the idea that the value of peer review is directly related to the quality of the reviewer; (3) proofreading/editing, the idea that peer reviewing is synonymous with checking for errors; and (4) other, comments that did not fit within the other three categories. Of the 160 responses to the last question on the student survey, we coded 60 for topic; 100 responses simply expressed positive or negative opinions of peer review, (e.g. *Peer review is great!*) Of those 60 comments, 31 (52%) remarked about the value of the reviewer, and 28 (47%) focused on proofreading or editing. Eight comments referred to peer reviewing as busywork. All but two comments fit one of the three categories; five comments included references to both the value of the reviewer and proofreading.

**Conclusions**

This study suggests that we have much work to do in helping students understand what peer review is (collaborative learning), and, more pointedly, what it isn’t (proofreading). An extensive L2 study by Villamil and de Guerrero finds that, of changes suggested in peer review that were incorporated, “grammar was the most revised aspect whereas organization was the least attended to” (508). These findings of Villamel and De Guerrero are corroborated by research conducted by Asraf Ratnawati, who found that L2 students were extremely concerned about grammatical errors even though the assignment in question was not to be graded (76). Although the respondents to our survey were not L2 learners, they also had a clear expectation that peer review should help them catch proofreading errors. Likewise, Murau’s study of both native and non-native speakers finds that both student groups appreciate peer review because it can help with, in their words, “minor mistakes” in “grammar, vocabulary” (74). This student concept of peer review is so common that Fiona Paton advises instructors to “be aware, however,
that most first-year students will approach peer review as a proofreading exercise and will tend to remain on the level of correcting spelling and punctuation” (292.) This misunderstanding of the theoretical goals of collaborative learning is surprising in light of the fact that collaboration in the writing classroom has been common for at least twenty years.

Student surveys in our study revealed a similar concern related to the perceived ability of the peer reviewer and his/her investment in providing quality feedback. While this study was not designed to investigate this aspect of peer review, many students indicated that they did not trust their peers to review their papers, stating that “I’ve never understood how having all students, including those who make C’s & D’s on papers, is beneficial. If they can’t write a good paper, why do I want them to correct mine?” (Student survey #308). Of the 52% of the free-response comments that focused on the quality of the reviewer, most expressed concerns about classmates’ dedication and ability to peer review. For example, one student responded, “I don’t trust my peers to review my paper. I don’t think they can do it competently, just like I don’t think I can give a good Peer review b/c I am a horrible writer” (Student survey #272).

Even at a university with limited diversity, students enter the writing classroom with varying writing experiences and skills. Some may have written extensively in high school and developed fairly robust composing processes, including peer review skills, while others may have written only sparingly. Some students are confident in their writing abilities while others would rather give a speech or jump from the proverbial airplane than write a paper. If the developed writer laments the lack of “qualified peers” available for review, he or she may be correct on some levels: the excellent student writer may not have a true peer if that student defines a peer as someone of equal skills. Again, we suspect that students do not understand the purpose of peer review and its value in a developed writing process.

The literature on both L1 and L2 studies shows that this attitude of distrust toward the peer reviewer is not uncommon. In a 1992 study, Kate Mangelsdorf finds that 77% of L2 students surveyed who did not like peer review were afraid that their peers would not provide valid advice (qtd. in Murau 2). A similar study, in 1997, finds much the same results: one surveyed L2 writer states, “Peer Revision is a positive side to writing, but your peers do not always give you valuable feedback. Often my writing has changed for the worse when I receive comments from my peers” (qtd. in McGroarty and Zhu 31). In Collaborative Learning: Higher Education, Interdependence and the Authority of Knowledge, Bruffee refers to a long example provided by David L. Rubin discussing “Zelda” and her difficult experience learning to trust her peer reviewers, an experience he finds representative of many writers. Perhaps because of this distrust, most students in our survey prefer to choose a friend or family member whom they know and in whom they have confidence, a preference which is indicated in Murau’s study as well. Murau notes that “the trust of a good friend also seemed to be a factor when choosing a
reviewer for L1 and L2 writers” (75). To the student, it seems only logical that for a peer to be helpful he or she must be at least as skilled as the writer.

Helping students to accept that collaboration rather than correction is the goal of the writing group is essential to the successful peer review session. The conclusion that McGroarty and Zhu reach is one that many instructors (Hansen and Liu; Cahill; Paton, etc.) have reached through practice: thorough preparation for peer review is vital to its success. Possibly, such preparation will offset the sense many students have that peers are not helpful, both by teaching students how to be effective reviewers and by teaching student writers what kind of help to look for (and appreciate) from peer reviewers. Our study suggests that providing handouts and lecturing are insufficient methods for demonstrating the collaborative value of peer review. The results of this survey indicate that professors must invest a great deal of class time to ensure a productive peer review, a finding in keeping with current literature on the subject. For example, Paul Rollinson suggests that “pre-training” for peer review focus on three areas: (1) raising awareness, (2) productive group interaction, and (3) productive response and revision. Like many others, he also recommends teacher feedback after peer review. Altogether, these perspectives suggest that the teacher spend substantial time focusing on the activity.

Although we agree with Paton that “[p]roductive peer review requires a typed and completed draft representing the student’s best effort to that point” (293), more emphasis on peer review as a global activity may be in order. Students should not seek only to “correct” errors but should see peer review as a brainstorming process as well as an editing process. Perhaps we should revise and re-create our notion of peer review as an ongoing part of the process, a part that begins with brainstorming and is revisited at various reiterative stages throughout the composing process.

Such a re-visioning would require instructors to rethink the way they currently conduct peer reviews. For example, the results of this study support the importance of building rapport among classmates if our goal is to encourage productive peer review. Students need to create a sense of shared community in order to develop dialogues of trust and to build confidence in their classroom peers. Handouts and lectures cannot accomplish this task. Lisa Cahill argues that peer review needs to be “more than a series of questions that function in the textual vein” (304). Similarly, Gayle Nelson and John Murphy reinforce such collaborative learning theory, finding that the number of peer reviewer suggestions implemented in students’ final essays depended on the communication environment of the reviewers/writers (cooperative or defensive) (140). This indicates that instructors need to continue to build collaborative groups that encourage rapport, moving away from lists of peer review questions that lead to a lot of writing, but little interaction.

Students seem to take their cues from instructors. If we stress the importance of peer review, our students are more likely to do so, but if we just go through the motions, perhaps passing out recycled handouts, our students will pick up on our lack of dedication and act accordingly. The results from our study
suggest that when students perceive purpose for the peer review (as opposed to an activity to take up class time, aka “busywork”) and faculty commitment to peer review (evidenced through regular practice, devotion of class time to preparing students to conduct peer review and actually doing peer review), they are more likely to feel confident about being able to review their classmates’ papers and seem to value the peer review process. And if we value peer review as a critical component of a fully elaborated writing process and accept the social interactive perspective of writing, then we must take the necessary steps to allow students to learn to trust their classmates as “true peers.”

Notes

1 Other researchers have noted that L1 and L2 students have different composing processes, language use, cultural perspectives, and motivation (see Silva, 1993; Atkinson and Ramanathan, 1995; Nero, 1997). We cannot assume that research on L2 learners always applies directly to L1 learners; however, we must acknowledge that similarities exist. As writing instructors, we must continue to search for ways in which L2 studies can inform L1 and vice versa.

2 According to Maxwell, “A small sample that has been systematically selected for typicality and relative homogeneity provides far more confidence that the conclusions adequately represent the average members of the population than does a sample of the same size that incorporates substantial random or accidental variation” (71).

3 ACT composite middle 50% range for entering freshmen is 23-28.

4 We do not know for certain whether all 22 faculty who completed the survey also had students complete the surveys, but most bundles of student surveys were accompanied by one faculty survey.

5 Data Collection Procedures: Faculty who taught as part of the first-year Communication Arts program or upper-level, writing-intensive courses were invited to participate via email. Faculty who elected to participate had the option of using electronic or paper surveys. We asked faculty to complete the faculty survey and to have their students complete (paper) student surveys. We worked to triangulate this study, working with both quantitative and qualitative data. First, we included two questions on all course evaluations for 27 first-year Communication Arts courses. These evaluations were completed in campus computer labs during class time as part of the regular course evaluation process. Student enrollment for these courses was 502; of those, 398 students completed evaluations (79.28% response rate). The evaluations were anonymous, and to ensure faculty and student privacy, only aggregate responses to the questions were provided. Second, we created one survey for writing faculty and another survey for students in writing-intensive courses. The surveys consisted of seven
questions, including Likert-type evaluative questions as well as specific response and open-ended questions for gathering qualitative data.

**Data Analysis Procedures:** Much of the data was analyzed using frequency counts and percentages. Where appropriate, primarily with student surveys, SPSS® software was used to calculate correlations and statistical significance. Likert-type and multiple choice responses were assigned specific numerical values as nominal variables for computational purposes. Free-response or open-ended questions (e.g., responses where we asked respondents to explain “other”) were assessed qualitatively, meaning we allowed categories to sift out from the data rather than imposing preconceived categories. After carefully reviewing and discussing the free responses, we coded free responses to question #7 on the student survey in two ways: (1) as either positive or negative toward peer review and (2) topically (whether the comment focused on the reviewer, etc.). Other free responses were not coded at this time. After agreeing on appropriate categories and defining those categories, both researchers coded the data separately (92% agreement rating) and reached consensus through discussion on disputed codes. We worked to use this study as a preliminary exploration into the numbers of peer review.

6 Frankly, we were somewhat dismayed at finding that so few of our own students appreciated the university’s Communication Resource Center (CRC—our writing/speaking center). Tutors in the CRC are undergraduates who were recommended, usually by their first-year Communication Arts’ instructor, to the center’s director. Not surprisingly, such recommendations are based on students’ excellence in writing and speaking assignments during that first-year course. While we believe our tutors offer strong support to fellow students and work collaboratively with fellow students on writing and speaking assignments, we are aware that, as Trimbur points out, undergraduate tutors must learn “to negotiate the conflicting claims on [their] social allegiances” (“Peer Tutoring” 121). This is no small task.

7 In the study by McGroarty and Zhu, the student who showed dissatisfaction with peer review was one of a control group of students who received limited training in peer review techniques. The authors then examined the control group’s perception of the peer review process, the validity of group members’ comments on the papers of others, and their teacher’s “feel” for how effective peer review was. Results show that the control group had a generally negative experience in all aspects examined. These student comments seem quite similar to those of our own students. McGroarty and Zhu’s study, however, is most valuable for examining what happens when peer review is taught early on as a skill: students in the experimental group that received extensive instruction in peer review had a far more positive experience.
WORKS CITED


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PROMOTING THE EXCHANGE OF VOICES AND IDEAS IN ONE-TO-ONE TEACHING OF WRITING

*The Writing Lab Newsletter* is a forum for exchanging ideas and information about writing centers in high schools, colleges, and universities. It is a publication of the International Writing Centers Association, an NCTE affiliate.

Articles focus on challenges in tutoring theory and methodology, handling ESL issues, directing a writing center, training tutors, adding computers, designing and expanding centers, and using tutorial theory and pedagogy.

In addition to articles, issues contain conference announcements, book reviews, professional news, job announcements, and a column by and for tutors. The newsletter is published monthly from September to June, and it is a refereed publication.

For subscriptions, manuscript submission guidelines, and archives, please see the *WLN* Web site: <http://writinglabnewsletter.org>. 
Mentoring as Mosaic:
Life as Guerilla Theater

I never had a formal mentor. Indeed, when people ask me, “Who was your mentor?” and I say “No one,” they react with shock. How could that be? Yet neither the concept nor the reality were available to me as a grad student at Michigan 1957-62, territory largely off-limits to women at the time. Nevertheless, having snuck in under the cover of lightness, I had to learn how to enter the profession and, once I had a toehold, how to survive. Concomitantly, I had to learn to become a scholar and professional writer while, at the same time, I was learning to be a wife, mother, and citizen, and more—in short, while I was learning how to survive in the guerilla theater of life. Fifty years later, I’m still inventing and re-inventing ways to do it all in this life that is ever-exciting, never static.

What follows is an anatomization of some significant ways in which I—and by extrapolation, all of us—can experience the mosaic of mentorship, acquiring the elements of what we need to know and do to survive, even prevail, in professional situations. In real life, these invariably leach into the personal, but to keep the metaphor intact let’s imagine straight, precise edges rather than the blurs and blots of an Impressionist painting. When the pieces are assembled and adjusted to fit the contours of our individual personalities and our particular work, the mosaic delineates a professional portrait that is like no other.

Warning! This is a cheerful essay. It’s about a cheerful subject, coming-of-age professionally and acquiring knowledge and power in the process. Do-it-yourself discussions are always upbeat because the learner invariably succeeds in accomplishing the task(s) at hand. Although, as Yeats says, “we must labor to be beautiful,” self-help essays make everything look easier than it really is. If you want noir, try my “Teaching College English as a Woman.” If you want tales of exploitative mentors who stole their advisees’ research—or their virginity—I can refer you to victims who went to other schools (see also Tenner). For gloom see Rachel Hile Basset’s Parenting and Professing, discussed below. And for nervousness and anxiety amongst nouveau women scientists, check out the X-Girls series running in the Careers section of the Chronicle of Higher Education throughout 2006-2007. The good-old bad-old days seem to be with us still, judging from the reactions of “The Dismissive Male” and “The Condemning Wo/man” to their plight, evil “archetypes,” says Tess Isaac—yes, even in the twenty-first century—“who can derail your career” (C1). And, as
one of the astute reviewers of this manuscript observed, check out the footnotes in the essay you are reading “erupting” with “‘un-cheery’ thoughts.”

Nevertheless, in order to stick to the point—and to keep my cool on the very hot day when I’m revising this—I’ve decided against incorporating most of the negative advice, uncongenial personalities, lies, betrayals, and turbulence I’ve experienced.3 Remember, I’m writing this when many of the pieces are laid out and much of the design is apparent (though still subject to change, even now nothing is—dare I say?—set in stone)—a happy state indeed. So relax and enjoy it with me.

THE DESIGN

Even as a child I was a covert rebel. The Lessons in Life, imparted by my angry stay-at-home college-educated mom in the 40s and 50s, and reinforced by my happy stay-at-home grandmother (who had worked as a housemaid until she married a journeyman printer in 1902 and reared six children), focused on the need to “Sacrifice!” one’s own desires and ambitions for those of one’s family, actual or prospective. The mentorship they offered flew in on the wings of the Angel in the House, and flew out of my six-year-old consciousness just as fast, for my secret role models were Eleanor Roosevelt and a woman writer in my small college town. Oh, and Dr. Seuss, for as soon as I learned to read I decided I would become a writer and college professor, as well as a wife and mother—the most fun and noble callings I could imagine.

I understood even then that I would have to design my own mosaic for life. It would be bold, innovative, harmonious, attractive, female. I (and not someone else, particularly not my father, the only man I knew, a German patr familias chemical engineering professor) would determine its configuration. Since no whole model was apparent or accessible at the time (even Alcott’s Jo in Little Women copped out by subordinating her ambitions to her own Germanic professor husband) I would have to decide what my personal ideal of the good life should be and then find the pieces that suited it.4 I would arrange and, if necessary, rearrange them, omit some, learn to fit them together, improvising the ultimate design until it became a work of art, of life.

“Fortune favors the prepared mind,” said Pasteur, and I knew even in my innocence that to reinforce the ever-evolving design of a life-in-progress I would need to select the usable bits of advice—of differing sizes, shapes, textures, the very stones themselves—from wherever they came, whenever they arrived. I would need to be ever alert, aware of opportunity, and have a sense of a good fit for the right piece in the right place at the right time. I would also—and this part was easy—have to ignore the bits and pieces of advice I didn’t want to hear. But where in the world would I, could I, find appropriate mentors to show me what I needed to learn?
“Revere your husband and honor his right to rule you and your children.” This precept from Helen Andelin’s *Fascinating Womanhood* arrived in my office mailbox on the very day I was teaching *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. Had this allegedly good advice possessed a current date, instead of one from forty-four years ago (1963), I’d have treated it as a delicious send-up of conventional matrimonial relationships, an obligato to Gertrude Stein’s wise and witty presentation of her own unconventional matrimonial partnership in post-Impressionist Paris. Could not such admonitions as “Don’t try to excel [your husband] in anything which requires masculine ability” and “Don’t stand in the way of his decisions, or his law” serve as ironic commentary on Toklas’s ventriloquized observation that “The geniuses came and talked to Gertrude Stein and the wives sat with me. . . . [G]eniuses, near geniuses and might be geniuses, all having wives, and I have sat and talked with them all the wives. . . . (87). But *Fascinating Womanhood* and its clone, Marabel Morgan’s *The Total Woman*, published a decade later, were indeed sincere.

Let such period pieces serve as a metaphoric explanation for why, when I was preparing to enter grad school at the University of Michigan, one of the nation’s top twenty then as now, there was no concept of mentoring, or of being mentored—at least, not for women. For *Fascinating Womanhood* represents the masculinist sensibility—“Don’t let the outside world crowd you for time to do your homemaking tasks well,” as my mother and grandmother understood all too clearly—that prevailed throughout the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. Although I had received a faculty award for being Michigan’s Outstanding Honors English Major, the advice male faculty gave me, from their exclusively male bastion, could have kept me out of the profession entirely: “What right have you to take a man’s seat! Get a teaching certificate so you’ll have something to fall back on.” Or it might have molded me into a genderless creature without a husband, children, creativity, or independent research of my own: “Every child a man has is an incentive for him to strive harder. Every child a woman has is an albatross around her neck, an encouragement to drop out.” With advice like that, demeaning, dehumanizing, why would I want a mentor? I simply showed up, newly wed to Martin, a grad student in social psychology, to begin doctoral work of my own.

**The Do-It-Yourself Ethos**

The ethos of the time, the place. I could not, therefore, from the perspective of either a grad student or a newcomer to the profession, benefit from Janice Lauer’s “ethics of care,” whereby a mentor “exhibits a willingness to nurture, to act in concrete situations with emotional involvement, to make responsible moral decisions in particular human relationships . . . to step out of one’s personal frame of reference into the other’s” (234). The concept of the novice guided by a wise, caring, selfless, and unwavering mentor that prevails today simply was not part of the ethos of the time or place fifty years ago.
I doubt that any of the nation’s top graduate programs—in any field, including law and medicine as well as academic disciplines—would have provided mentoring that demonstrated an “ethic of care”—for either men or women students. An ERIC search of “mentors and mentoring” in “higher education” reveals no discussion of the topic between 1965 (ERIC’s starting date) and 1970: 33 articles in 1970-1979; after which, as Robert Gross reports, “the topic took off,” with “230 pieces in 1980-84; 597 in 1985-89; 1,051 in 1990-94; 1,524 in 1995-99” (Gross 2); the numbers are comparable in the current five-year period—1,949 hits as of October 11, 2005.

In graduate school. At Michigan there was, at least between my advisors and me, and I think, for most students, an invisible wall separating the professional from the personal. Literature students and faculty were not on a first name basis (the creative writers were a more raffish lot), but then, the era itself was more formal. (Remember that in the 50s women still wore hats, gloves, and high heels for airplane travel, and flight attendants dressed with comparable decorum.) Graduate students were expected to stay on their own side of the wall, which I did, and faculty on the other. This does not mean that my advisors were ill-disposed toward their students, only that they were impersonal and somewhat distant. Oh, I would occasionally walk the venerable Austin Warren home, carrying in my bike basket the tomes that undergirded his class. But my status was signaled indelibly when at a grad student wedding, he introduced me to his wife—“I’d like you to meet one of my very best students”—after which he whispered sotto voce, “What did you say your name was?”

At Michigan at the time, grad students had no choice of areas for prelim exams, which covered British and American lit from Beowulf to Virginia Woolf, as well as linguistics. The faculty made out the twelve-page single-spaced reading list—one line read “Shakespeare, complete works”—and most of us took the exams at the end of two years of coursework, no shilly-shallying. Such high-pressure preparation meant, for instance, memorizing a dozen restoration plays, full of interchangeable characters and plots, in three stupefying days. Nevertheless, the library I internalized has lasted all the days of my life; I draw on that information bank every day, in every class.

The faculty indeed knew what was good for us—and for themselves. We could not choose our dissertation directors or committee members, although we could sound out faculty with common interests; I got my first choices all round. Our meetings were focused on the work at hand, not on other professional issues such as getting a job, professional decorum, or publishing, or balancing the personal and professional aspects of one’s life. I did, however, invite my dissertation advisor and his wife and two-year-old to a cookout (with Martin grilling our dinner in a downpour) when I was nine months pregnant—a visit he never forgot in the post-dissertation years when we had become friends on a first-name basis.

New Ph.D., New Parent. Perhaps there wasn’t much concern with mentoring in the 50s and early 60s because jobs were plentiful, at least for men, and
arranged informally through phone calls. The MLA Job List hadn’t been invented; word of vacancies circulated through the Old Boy network; offers were made and accepted, largely to the New Boys on the auction block, married or single, with or without children. Married women were expected to follow their husbands (“Don’t have a lot of preconceived ideas of what you want out of life,” Andelin reminds us), and to heed the biological clock, though teaching freshman composition part-time was a safe harbor.⁸

I confess to having conformed willingly to these expectations. We left Ann Arbor with a ten-day-old infant; his brother was born two years later. Martin could earn more, so he took the full-time job, and I turned down a comparable offer, a position initiated by my dissertation advisor, that would have required a daily two-hour drive in icy Cleveland winters. On grounds that I’ve never regretted—that if I wanted to strongly influence our children’s values and well-being I needed to be around them a great deal during their formative years—I accepted, instead, a half-time assistant professorship (at, I might add, a far more prestigious university) near our house that meant only eighteen hours a week away from the children. If I’d had a female mentor, or any mentor who was invested in rearing children, would I have chosen differently? It’s impossible to say, for I had no female professors at Michigan (except for the adjuncts who taught women’s phys ed), and the only full-time women faculty during my first ten years on the job, full or part time, were single, except for myself.

THE IMPORTANT PIECES: MENTORS FOR COMBINING WORK AND MOTHERHOOD

Mom, a mixed model. My own mother was an indifferent housekeeper, self-declared “wire mother” rather than the “cloth mother” nurturer of psychologist Harry Harlow’s monkey experiments, who hated being an ancillary to her male chauvinist husband and would have been much happier as an artist. Our most enjoyable times were spent reading or drawing, but from the example of her continually smoldering frustration I understood that to be happy I had to be free to pursue my bright Utopian vision of the ideal life, academic and personal. Consequently, I would have to marry a man who not only shared these ideals but would act to reinforce them for both of us.

Pop, ditto. Although I couldn’t admit it in my mother’s presence, my father’s life as a professor always seemed more interesting than hers as a housewife. He got to spend long hours with students, to travel, and to write. What could be better? As I learned to think for myself, however, my writing style and humanistic values began to diverge greatly from his chemical engineer’s unwavering allegiance to nuclear energy and “better living through chemistry,” particularly DDT. Eventually I realized that all of his work was self-published, rather than appearing in scholarly journals and university and trade presses where it would “count.” When I started dating Martin as an undergrad, my father’s allegiance to me stopped dead.
Martin, the ideal life partner. That my parents disowned me on the eve of my marriage in 1958 (“If you marry that Jew we will have nothing to do with him, or you, or any children you might have”) eliminated further possibilities of their mentorship or even moral support for the most meaningful aspects of this life. Thus when Martin and I married we felt like Adam and Eve in the garden; in building a new life together in this brave new world, we had to figure out how to do it without intimate models. We adopted a single principle to govern our lives together: we would do whatever we could to enhance each others’ personal and professional lives. This principle, our version of the Golden Rule, made de facto feminists of us both. It meant, at the outset, that we would both work on our doctorates full-time, that we would share the responsibilities for earning money, being parents, and running the household; and that if one or the other of us needed extra help to accomplish something important, they’d get it. The proportions of each have varied over the years, with each of us assuming responsibility for what we could do—or liked to do—best.

Friends and neighbors. I have received excellent childrearing advice from friends and neighbors over the years (“Wipe off the blood from your child’s cut before you faint. It’ll be shallower than you expect”), but no single individual served as either mentor or model for trying to write, teach, and have a family. The twenty-four essays in Rachel Hile Basset’s Parenting and Professing—by contributors at every stage of the profession—make it clear how individualistic “Balancing Family Work with an Academic Career” (Bassett’s subtitle) can be. However, my essay, which addresses the weekly “Two Thousand Mile Commute” between St. Louis and Albuquerque in the 70s, to fulfill a dream job, seems to be the only unreservedly happy piece in the book, for the balancing act was exhilarating. Martin enabled me to accept this radically satisfying alternative to dismal adjuncting close at hand: “Go for it,” he said, and promised to be home from the university when our adolescent sons were home from school. And so I did.

Professional friendships. My strongest friendships with professional peers and colleagues, men and women alike, are based on what is fundamental to all good friendships—compatible values and common interests—rather than on mentorship models. Whether on the local campus or, more commonly, on the national scene (and now, via email), we reinforce each others’ professional work, we learn from each others’ scholarship, we work together in leadership positions, and we have fun together. As friends would do in any context, we have supported one another through professional crises (tenure fights, publication problems, general nastiness), as well as existential onslaughts—disfunction, disease, divorce, death. So when we say, as we sometimes do, that we regard each other as models for lives well lived, we know we are looking at all-too-human reflections of ourselves, not images of perfection.
MENTORS FOR RESEARCH AND WRITING

Writers whose works I like. To love literature from an early age is to fall in love with words, books, the sound and the sense, to—as Eudora Welty says of her mother—“read Dickens in the spirit in which she would have eloped with him.” Thus enraptured, we learn from writers we love ways of understanding and reacting to the world. Through their angles of vision, expressed in language individual and idiosyncratic, we learn a range of linguistic and stylistic strategies to imitate, test, reject, adapt, and make our own. I was too timid, too bourgeois, to adopt the lifestyle of noted writers of the 50s—falling-off-the-platform-drunk or sweetly suicidal—but from these excellent writers and their—largely nonfiction—successors I learned, and continue to learn, the virtues of clarity, economy, precision, and wit. A mosaic of possibilities.

People whose judgment I like, whose knowledge I need:

Undergraduate faculty. They determined the honors English curriculum at Michigan; their judgments, enthusiasms taught us what authors to like and why. They also taught us to think for ourselves, and when I did I discovered women writers and feminist readings—off limits to 50s professors but mainstream thirty years later. But perhaps the best advice came from my violin teacher, sophomore year: “Become a writer” (although he had never read a syllable I’d written). What would I have done if my scratching on paper had been as awful as that on four out-of-tune strings? I never thought to ask.

Graduate faculty—Top-of-the-line editor. One nonfiction faculty member, Art Eastman, himself a master teacher and paragon of clarity, taught me through meticulous line editing that questioned the choice of every word, every punctuation mark, every indentation and white space, the inextricable relations of sound and sense. His acute sensibility affects every revision I make.

Graduate faculty—Impeccable researchers. Throughout graduate school, but particularly at the dissertation stage, my advisors taught me how to do good library research—accurate, precise, thorough, impeccably documented. My dissertation advisor, Robert Super, was extraordinary at keeping my research on track and on time. He insisted on a chapter a month, which he read and discussed with me within twenty-four hours of receiving it—a particularly helpful process in view of the fact that I was also pushing the deadline of my first pregnancy. I’ve adopted his efficient time frame as the ideal for my own dissertation advisees, though not all find it as congenial as I did.

Advice from publishing scholars. Although I occasionally received papers in both grad and undergrad courses with “Publish this!” on the margins, the faculty never showed us how to do it; publication was what faculty did, not students. But I did have the good fortune to collaborate with one of my grad school professors, Francis Lee Utley—a medievalist, linguist, Americanist—on Bear, Man, and God, a collection of readings on William Faulkner’s The Bear that grew out
of Fran’s proposal and the prelim notes a fellow grad student, Arthur Kinney, and
I had prepared. Fran’s gracious good sense mediated between Art’s pedantry and
my insouciance. In addition to scholarly scrupulosity, he brought balance and wit
(“Do I detect a rebuke?”) to the collaborative process.

My own research sense. Following the practice of some of my cutting-edge professors, I taught myself how to ask the good (i.e. original and exciting) questions—those that went where no man or woman (yes!) had gone before. I taught myself how to figure out the methodology to address these questions. And I especially taught myself how to persevere with enticing projects, such as writing the first and—for twenty five years thereafter—only biography of America’s most widely-read author, Dr. Benjamin Spock, when conventional wisdom advised writing only about high-culture authors who were safely dead. Indeed, my first post-Ph.D. department chair’s opinion had been emphatic: “If you write about Dr. Spock, you’ll cut your throat professionally,” he said. “Why don’t you write biographical articles about major poets to establish your career, and then you can afford to throw it away on Spock.” As I proceeded to do what I wanted anyway, I realized that no grad school advice had addressed either the ethics or the methodology of working entirely from primary materials, developing a professional friendship with one’s subject, conducting extensive interviews, dealing with the correspondence of living authors—or going on peace marches and having one’s phone tapped by the FBI in the course of research. I learned on the job.

Advice from Dr. Spock. Dr. Spock also taught me to write. The trusting pediatrician never looked at my writing to see whether my dissertation style, perforce formal and bristling with footnotes, would be compatible with his friendly, low-key advice to parents. When I began the biography, my first extended post-dissertation research, our styles would have clashed. But in time I learned from analyzing the style of this Strunk and White of baby book authors to write with clarity and precision—as if a child’s life depended on it. I learned to translate technical language into nonspecialized terms, to break up long sentences and paragraphs to please the ear and the eye, a reinforcement of Eastman’s good advice. Spock composed aloud, sometimes in my presence, and from him I learned to listen to the words, the music, the sounds of silence. He also gave me occasional child rearing advice (unwilling to say to my young sons, “Go away, don’t bother me, I’m writing about Dr. Spock,” I learned to work with them in the room); it was like hearing the word of God.

Co-authorship with Martin. Although I had edited a textbook before I began the biography, I did not believe that—as a part-time teacher—I had the right to publish in a scholarly journal. (How I could combine the humility of this irrational belief left over from grad school with the chutzpah necessary to write the biography of America’s most famous living author is a paradox I cannot, to this day, understand.) My first scholarly article was a case study of a student writer’s writing and revision process, but because he did all of his work in his dorm—off
limits to women—Martin volunteered to do the observations. He asked the right questions, kept good notes, and as a consequence, we co-authored the paper and decided to submit it to *College English*, then as now the major journal in the field. So reticent was I that I urged submission only under his name, but when the acceptance arrived by return mail he said, “Now do you want your name on it?” and insisted that I be first author. Not only has Martin always given me a room of my own, but a name of my own.

Martin is also my most reliable critic. Along with my research assistants *du jour*, he reads the penultimate draft of everything I write. The fact that he’s in a different field means that I can’t count on him to supply a lot of background information, to tolerate in-group critical jargon, or to agree with the discipline’s prevailing conventional judgments. If he can’t read it or doesn’t get it, I rewrite until he does. I used to argue and protest a lot, but I’m kinder, gentler these days—except on the rare occasions when he says, “This still needs a lot more work.”

**Editors and manuscript reviewers.** Publication of the *College English* article (1969) was all it took to set me on the fast track. It’s possible to get derailed, of course; one friend rewrote her dissertation over a dozen years, from feminist, then deconstructionist, then post-modernist perspectives before finally finding a publisher who stayed in business long enough to get it into print. But I have found it easier to stay on track by reminding myself of Dr. Spock’s quintessential advice—“Trust yourself. You know more than you think you do.” This has been a useful mantra throughout years of submitting articles, essays, and reviews, and developing books-in-progress to editors with highly variable agendas, perspectives, and tastes. Yet even when I was not a confident writer, I didn’t want editors to change anything, let alone serve as mentors to their vision of my writing. In the spirit of M. Grand, the aspiring writer in Camus’s *The Plague*, I know that when I send something in—particularly if it’s a commissioned piece—I want editors to read the first paragraph, nay, the first sentence, and leap to their feet in rapturous huzzahs, “Hats off!”

Nevertheless, there are occasions when editors prevail, and their common sense corroborates what I should have done in the first place. One no-nonsense editor wrote, in response to a two-page single-space footnote of material that I was trying to shoehorn into an article where it didn’t belong, “Stick to the point!” Another editor observed that (yes) I used too many parentheses—so I switched to dashes, until another editor called me on that. Others have enhanced concision, elegance, wit. Their good advice has resonance. If I like it, I use it all the time; if I don’t, I ignore it. Yet I would not call these editors mentors. They are numerous; their advice is sporadic; often they know me essentially as a name on a manuscript, a voice in an email.

My work has also benefited, particularly in recent years, from incisive readings by outside reviewers. As usual, I choose what to accept and what to reject. A current case in point: the external referees for this essay you are reading have saved me from disaster and dowdiness. Charlotte Hogg questioned the
legitimacy of a dubious source. She was right, and I spent several (I must admit, happy) hours revising the questionable section to ensure accuracy. Both Charlotte and Janet Eldred, the other reviewer, agreed that “patchwork”—my initial integrating metaphor—was a big fat feminist cliché (they were more polite than that). “Lose it,” they said (also more politely). I’ve substituted “mosaic.”

In contrast, I have often found myself at odds with editors of full-length books. I’d love to have had the editorial benefit of a Maxwell Perkins, every writer’s dream—and mentor—but I suspect that my own experience is more typical. Sometimes I endure—the tarting up of design, the dumbing down of vocabulary; sometimes I rebel—don’t mess with my style or my German grandmother, who wasn’t ethnic enough for one editor. Ach! But this is a process of negotiation, not mentoring. My editors have not been at all concerned with my growth and development as a writer; their focus is consistently on larger sales. Yet I wonder how Richard Wright felt when he agreed to sever the last third of Black Boy from the original manuscript of American Hunger in order to ensure its distribution by Book of the Month Club.

**High-tech research assistants.** I trust my research assistants, their candor as readers of work-in-progress. They know more than I do, especially about computer maintenance and arcane internet searches. I learn from them what I need to know and trust them to help me find the best information, to interpret it accurately, and to cite it with precision.

**Colleagues and students turned friends and collaborators.** When I agree to work with graduate students, I am making a commitment not just to help them pursue their own ideas, their own dreams, until they earn their degree. This full-service mentorship comes with a lifetime guarantee, renewable on request. My former graduate students and some younger as well as more seasoned colleagues, men as well as women, tell me they appreciate the help I give and the examples I set—as a teacher and scholar, wife and mother.

I feel it would be the height of hubris to set myself up as a model to be emulated, but I make it very clear why I do what I am doing (for love, for the pleasure of taking risks with subject and style, to shake up the profession, to change the lives—of my students and my readers), how I get the work done (deadlines!), how good it has to be (the best it can be in the time—always finite—I have to do the work). And they can see how my work is integrated with the rest of my life; marriage, motherhood, hospitality, daily exercise, and good deeds (sssh!) are all part of the mix. What they sometimes call mentoring I consider friendship; we are colleagues in the larger world and thrive on our mutual exchange of ideas. This takes a variety of forms: generating ideas for articles and books, and writing some together; organizing conferences and publishing volumes of the papers; founding and co-editing a professional journal; reading each others’ manuscripts with a critical eye. Sharing advice on jobs, getting and managing the good ones, getting over the bad. And just hanging out together, at meetings or on vacation. We have become each others’ best friends.
THE MOSAIC PATTERN

Would my professional life have been different with more consistent mentoring from a single person or two? It’s impossible to know. I might have foregone my maverick ways and become a replica of my male mentors. Had I done so, I’d have labored in the vineyards of Milton or Arnold and never reached the promised land of autobiography, creative nonfiction, and composition studies—mainstream now but virtually invisible when I was in grad school.

The mentoring style—of receiving and of giving—that has evolved over the course of my life has to me been far more satisfying than it would have been to model my life after a single person. Indeed, Tenner’s analysis of “The Pitfalls of Academic Mentorships” recommends “diversification,” and concludes with the observation that “Mentoring deserves neither uncritical support nor demonization because, in the end, all mentoring is self-mentoring” (B9). I can’t think of a single individual whose clone I’d like to be, though if I could wear designer genes there are a lot I’d love to try on. The pattern of the mosaic that has emerged—ever subject to change and tweaking—remains stimulating and sometimes surprising. It continues to suit me, and I’m happy to help others find their own design, their own ways of determining and altering the configuration of professional and personal options until they discover their own Platonic ideal of the best work, the best life.

NOTES

1 Nor were they to Robert Gross in History at Columbia a decade later (1).
2 Isaac quotes one dismissive woman’s typical reply: “[S]top publishing articles that highlight the ‘unique’ problems of women in the academic workplace where they are clearly just poor individual choices, because they only hurt the chances of women who are serious about their career” (C4). This correspondent’s harsh voice echoes throughout the decades of my own attempts to represent my professional struggles as generic, rather than individual, as I did in “Teaching College English as a Woman.”
3 And who hasn’t? The observation “No wonder academic politics are so vicious, the stakes are so low” is always with us, yes?
4 I hated that part of the book so much that after a couple of readings I learned to skip over it. I read it again in preparation for this essay; it’s still loathsome.
5 In 1975 I collaborated with two counselors to write an antidote, The New Assertive Woman, whose jacket copy proclaimed “How to know what you feel, say what you mean, and get what you want.” That this book has been translated into Spanish, Japanese, and German and lives to this day online via print-on-demand (Do-It-Yourself-Books) attests to how hungry women were for empowering advice. Nevertheless, the sales of this book, though far more robust than any of the twenty-five scholarly volumes I’ve published since then, pale in comparison with
those of Andelin (over 2 million) and Morgan (over 3.5 million), still in print and reaping rave reviews from readers.

6 All Andelin quotations are from http://www.snopes.com/language/document/goodwife.asp

7 That they are in a resurgence today is reflected in Story’s “Many Women at Elite Colleges Set Career Path to Motherhood” (see also Story, “Background”). So, sadly, are contemporary updates of Andelin and Morgan such as Laura Doyle’s The Surrendered Wife and Lysa TerKeurst’s Capture His Heart. Like their predecessors, both are Bible-based.

8 That these expectations prevail in some places even today is documented by Melanie Springer Mock’s experiences of adopting two infants while she was on the tenure track at a “conservative Christian university”—and a Quaker school, at that. God appears to have spoken in decontextualized “sound bites about the virtues of subjugating women. . . . My decision to continue working after becoming a mother obviously transgresses what they see as a biblical mandate: Men are to be the heads of their households; women are made to nurture children; and only men—and, to a lesser degree, childless women—can successfully operate in academe. . . . Because the church has long held that a woman’s sphere is in the home, and because church tradition is sacrosanct, we must uphold the ideal of the stay-at-home mother” (2).

9 The cognoscenti will recognize that Utley was at Ohio State, not Michigan. I spent a year in exile there, having initially been told I couldn’t apply to Michigan’s doctoral program. “Your grades aren’t good enough,” said the advisor. “But,” I protested, “I have a 3.95 and the catalog says people can get in with a 3.5.” “What that means, young lady,” he replied, “is that women need a 4.0; Men can get in with a 3.0.”

10 One editor removed most of the three and four-syllable words from The New Assertive Woman and in the process made it a best seller. Other editors have tried to turn innovative textbooks into clones of competing works—with dubious results. Still a different editor red pencilled all the wit and flow from my prose until I insisted on—and got—a different editor who liked my style. And then there was the high-strung editor who, after a year’s delay, returned my lyrical-yet-scholarly forty-page introduction to a World War II diary I’d edited with savage XXs slashed in #1 pencil across every page—symbolic, I realized, of her impending divorce. (Rather than slug out the changes, word-by-word, I simply wrote a new and, I must admit, much better introduction.) The list goes on.
WORKS CITED


COURSE DESCRIPTION

English 4090, Collaborative Writing at Work, is a course I have taught twice; this essay focuses on the most recent time, Spring 2006. The course is a senior-level elective designed to reinforce students’ existing knowledge of professional writing and to teach students how to apply that knowledge effectively in collaborative contexts. Students complete both individual and group assignments, mostly the latter. The major group project asks students to create a company that is sending a group of employees overseas. As part of this project, students prepare a mission statement describing their company, a proposal explaining the rationale for choosing a particular country, a research review evaluating sources about that country, a progress report, a brochure introducing the country to employees being sent there, and an oral presentation briefing those employees. Students also read and discuss articles about group process and collaboration, creating a theoretical base they can use both in the class and in their professional lives.

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Kean University is a public metropolitan university located in Union, New Jersey, approximately thirty minutes from New York City. Its mission, according to the undergraduate catalog, is to prepare students “to think critically and creatively; to adapt to changing social, economic, and technological environments; and to serve as active and contributing members of their communities” (4). Approximately 13,000 undergraduate and graduate students, most of whom commute, make up the student body. In Fall 2005, about half were classified in

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a minority group (Fact). Tuition and fees for in-state students in Spring 2006 were $3,750.00, and approximately sixty percent of the student body receives some sort of financial aid (Tuition; Financial). The full-time faculty numbers 384, with a large contingent of part-time faculty (Fact). Kean is best known for teacher education, with Elementary Education the largest major on campus and Early Childhood Education the fourth largest (Fact). State law requires Education majors to select a second major in a content area. Many choose English.

The English major contains four options. The standard option and two teacher-certification options (one for secondary education and one for teachers of students with disabilities) emphasize literature. Elementary and Early Childhood Education majors can choose either the standard or the writing option. Students fulfilling the writing option take the following required courses: the history and theory of writing, advanced composition, writing about literature, a Shakespeare survey, an introduction to grammar and linguistics, and a capstone seminar. Most of the courses in the writing option are electives: students must take eight, two in literature and six in writing. This flexibility gives students the opportunity to tailor their course of study to meet their interests.

Collaborative Writing at Work most obviously benefits those students interested in professional writing. The course gives them more practice with writing in professional genres, helping them learn how to prepare those documents effectively when working with a group. Since the course is usually offered in the evening, it tends to attract working students who want to advance their careers. Education majors, particularly those fulfilling the writing option, also take ENG 4090. The course benefits these students by introducing them to theories and issues related to group process; these future educators can use that information to decide how to use groups in their pedagogy.

Theoretical Background

The course proposal for ENG 4090 lists three objectives: “to review and reinforce the principles and practices of writing on the job,” “to demonstrate that working as a team to develop and produce a useable project makes members more tolerant and respectful of the opinions of others,” and “to convince students that . . . the more important the document is to an organization, the more likely it will be produced by collaboration” (2). The final objective is borne out by research in workplace writing. Lester Faigley and Thomas P. Miller surveyed 200 college-educated businesspeople and found that approximately 74 percent of their sample worked in groups to complete at least a quarter of all writing tasks their jobs required (567). Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford’s wider-ranging survey (which included about 700 people from seven different professional organizations) found similar results; roughly 87 percent of their sample spent time writing in a group (60). Essentially, students who plan to enter business and technical fields need to learn how to work in groups.
Ede and Lunsford also state that 61 percent of their respondents felt that their education did not adequately prepare them for collaborative writing (59). While most business and technical writing textbooks contain advice and assignments on collaborative writing, such material usually cannot be the center of an introductory course. This type of class usually does not have time to cover collaborative writing as thoroughly as traditional business genres, especially if students have little experience with them. Collaborative Writing at Work assumes students already know how to prepare common types of business documents. The class spends most of its time learning strategies for preparing those documents in a collaborative context. Usually, this means students spend about half of each class working in their groups. The course, in other words, emphasizes interpersonal processes over learning new genres.

While ENG 4090 gives students plenty of chances to collaborate, those chances occur in the controlled, contained world of a classroom. I try carefully to design the collaborative groups, working to combine students with complementary skills, matching blocks of free time, and corresponding work styles. Also, most students are of basically the same social rank. However, most collaboration in the professional world is not as leveled or controlled. Students will have to work with people of varying social backgrounds, with widely different work styles, or with many other differences. To prepare for these complications, students need to learn the principles that affect collaboration. We read articles on group process, group conflict, authorship, modes of collaboration (focusing on Ede and Lunsford’s hierarchical and dialogic modes), computers and collaboration, and collaboration and difference (with an emphasis on gender). Most of these articles come from academic journals, and their ideas can be hard for even experienced undergraduates to process. To help, at least one person writes a reaction memo that summarizes and responds to the article, ending with questions to prompt class discussion. I hope students become self-aware collaborators through the discussion, recognizing the factors that influence collaboration and responding to them as they work with any group to which they belong.

Students also become self-aware collaborators through the course’s reflective elements. Students keep process logs where they describe and reflect on their experiences working with their group. The log “encourages group members to think about and write about the interaction process, how it influences their written products, and how they can improve their communication skills” (Goldstein 24). In addition, students respond in process logs to assigned prompts, most of which explore ideas raised in the theoretical readings. One prompt, connected to a reading on authorship, asked students to explain how they personally defined authorship and how that definition differed from the one their group seemed to have adopted. Other prompts are strictly reflective, asking students to look back at a specific task the group completed and evaluate it—or discuss what they learned from the experience. Through these prompts and the other log entries, students have the chance to learn “a full range of collaborative strategies” (Lay 5).
Besides encouraging reflection, process logs are an important means of assessment, a frequently-mentioned concern in publications on teaching collaborative writing. Dennis H. Barbour considers grading collaborative texts a bigger “ethical dilemma” than grading of single-author texts (33-34). John D. Beard and his collaborators state that a possible problem occurs when teachers use a “procedure that grades students based only by output—the group-written product—and ignores individual contributions to the group process” (30). If group process is not evaluated, students may be less involved in it, thus missing the point of a collaborative assignment. Through the logs, instructors gain a “glimpse into the processes groups use to plan and write their documents, allowing [them] to give credit where credit is due—to fairly evaluate the process” (Morgan et al., “Evaluating” 84). My evaluation of the logs follows the criteria outlined by Meg Morgan and her collaborators; I look at “the completeness and substantive nature of the content” in entries (85). Students submit the log at the semester’s midpoint. I offer feedback on the entries and assign a tentative grade. The final grade is recorded when students submit the final log at the end of the semester.

In addition to balancing process and product when grading collaborative work, instructors must consider fairness. The simplest definition of fairness, and the one most commonly held by my students, is one in which everyone receives credit for the work they do. Collaborative projects can allow weaker or lazier students to earn higher grades than they deserve. Students forced to take up the slack could cry unfairness, and their instructor may not be able to ease their fears. No matter how conscientious a teacher is, he or she cannot observe every group all the time, which can make their judgments invalid. Peer evaluation is one way to respond to these concerns. Richard Freeman and Roger Lewis argue that group members are in the “best position to make judgments [about their peers’ involvement in the group] and [have] the most information on which to draw” (292). Many other sources on peer evaluation agree. Peer evaluation, as well as the process log, “helps students realize that they share accountability for their own performance and for the performance of their group members” (Morgan et al., “Collaborative” 25).

I integrate peer evaluation into the course through both informal and formal means. One of the first process log prompts asks students to describe their initial impressions of their group. Later prompts ask them to revisit those impressions, describing how they were confirmed or changed. Students also write two informal group assessments, adapted from an assignment in Kitty Locker’s Business and Administrative Communication (257). These assessments are informal because only the writer earns the grade from this assignment, instead of the writer grading his or her peers. Students start the memo by objectively describing the group’s work; then, they evaluate their peers’ performance. The first group assessment, done at the course’s midpoint, is written in memo format and submitted only to me. The second is an email sent to me and the whole group. The privacy of the first group assessment enables me to subtly help groups without disrupting the tentative web of trust that should be growing among the group members. By the second group
assessment, the groups should know each other well enough for criticism not to hurt the group’s cohesion.

The informal evaluations prepare students for the formal peer evaluations, where they grade each other’s performance and the grade counts. I used to distribute a multiple-criteria set of scales (which seems to be the standard approach in published sources), but I asked students in my Spring 2006 class to give their peers a numeric grade and to write a paragraph justifying the score. The justification gives me a better sense of the students’ reasoning, something a ranking scale does not record. It also allows me to see if the evaluation is being unfairly influenced by personality conflicts. If it is, I can adjust the score. The formal peer evaluation occurs twice. The first is near the semester’s midpoint, approximately two weeks after the first group assessment. I summarize the feedback for each student, asking the students to talk with their groups about any concerns their peers raised. The second evaluation occurs during the last class. I average the evaluations together to determine the final score.

Although the course’s focus is collaborative writing, students still need to refine their individual writing skills. The reaction memos, group assessments, and shorter homework assignments give them this chance. These assignments also help me ensure “that my final assessment of a student’s performance [is] reflected accurately through the final grade,” instead of a student using his or her group members to disguise a lack of involvement in the course (Barbour 34).

**Reflection**

Overall, the Spring 2006 course seems to have been a good learning experience for the students. From my vantage point, they produced quality documents and grew in their writing abilities through both collaborative and individual assignments. The groups also appeared to work together effectively, though it took one group much longer to cohere than the other. In a final process log entry, the students reported that they better understood how to collaborate and why collaboration is an important professional skill. The following comment is typical:

I have not ever had so much collaborative work over such an extended period of time as I have this semester. This gave me the opportunity to work with four strangers on a number of projects. I feel that although this class was about writing projects, the experience gained from working with others can be used in other social circumstances in everyday life. Working with other people is a give-and-take process, which is how the world operates.

This response emphasizes the interpersonal aspects of the course. Another student made a similar point, focusing on the differences in status that can make up a group: “Collaboration is hard. I could end up dealing with people who are not at the same
level as me, be it higher or lower and I still need to constantly search for a common road in the group.” This writer ended his log by stating, “Collaborative writing is fun,” a sentiment the rest of the students seemed to share.

While the students made the groups work, we all felt they were too large. The Spring 2006 class contained two groups with five students in each. This size made it difficult for everyone in a group to meet together outside of class. The size may have also prevented one group from cohering as quickly as it could have. When a couple of students commented on the size of the groups, I explained that circumstances forced it. I originally created three groups of four students. A couple of hours before the groups were to be announced, I learned two students had dropped the course. Both were in the same group. Because of the time crunch and other deadlines that day, I moved the remaining two students into other groups instead of redesigning all the groups. I feel lucky the groups worked as well as they did. In the future, I will attempt to develop a backup set of groups that shift students around while still combining people with similar schedules and complementary skills. Of course, this plan may not work, given the overloaded schedules of many Kean students and my own inability to predict who might drop a course. However, a back-up plan may limit the impact of panicked, last-minute changes.

Computers can allow students to work together without meeting physically, but the Spring 2006 class rarely used this approach. Our attempt to meet purely online was a disaster. For this class, students were supposed to post a draft of their research review to a WebCT discussion board, and the other group would workshop it. One group posted their draft on time; the other group not only lacked a complete draft but also failed to contact each other in time to prepare anything. Two members of the group without a draft sent me panicked emails, but I was attending a conference in another state, too far away to be of much help. As might be expected, process logs written by students in both groups said computerized collaboration was not useful.

I asked the group that did not post a draft to reflect on what happened, using the group’s WebCT discussion board. Three students did. All agreed that the group worked together well in class, but their communication outside of class was weak. They were also having to deal with a group member who had missed many classes and was not the best participant when present. The problems associated with their research review, combined with having to reflect afterward, seemed to benefit the group. They strengthened their communication and produced a very strong brochure and oral presentation. As one member wrote in his process log: “My group probably could have gotten more organized earlier in the semester, but at all is better than not at all. We really lashed the proverbial horse, and our group moved fast during these last few weeks. Our PowerPoint is done, our brochure is essentially finished, and our group is finally filling in the roles needed to take ourselves [instead] of just blaming each other.”

The problems all the students encountered working online probably came from my not adequately preparing them. Many of Kean’s students possess
minimal digital literacy outside of social networking sites. Almost every semester, several students in my first-year composition classes claim to have never sent an email attachment; a few cannot make Word automatically double-space lines of text. I assumed that the juniors and seniors in ENG 4090 had learned more about computers than my first-year students. We did practice using Word’s commenting function. We also read about the process of circulating a document for electronic commenting, but we did not practice doing so. Students used the commenting features and then sent the document straight to me. The next time I teach the course, I plan to have students cycle a document among multiple people, each contributing different revisions. We can then discuss how to keep different versions of a file straight, how to communicate effectively in electronic environments, and other aspects of collaborating by computer. We will also spend more time using WebCT for collaboration, including assignments designed to give groups a chance to work out problems with the technology in class and increase their comfort level.

Increasing student technology use could allow for another change to the course: more frequent reviews of the process logs. The logs provide valuable feedback on how students perceive the course—as well as help the students and me evaluate how the groups function (Morgan et al., “Collaborative” 23; Goldstein 24). Adding more process log checks, however, increases the workload of an already intense course. One compromise would be to create individual discussion topics on WebCT and have students keep their logs there. I could easily skim new posts throughout the semester, offering feedback as needed. This approach would also allow the class to probe issues that students raise in their logs throughout the semester, not just after the midpoint check.

Finally, I want to continue updating and adding to the theoretical readings as new issues related to collaboration are discussed in published research. I would particularly like to find more detailed sources on collaboration and difference. In Spring 2007, I used Mary Lay’s “Interpersonal Conflict in Collaborative Writing: What We Can Learn from Gender Studies.” It presents an extremely comprehensive analysis of how gender differences can affect collaboration, but it says less about other forms of difference, such as ethnicity or status. An article that discusses a wider range of differences would help prepare students for the varied cultural backgrounds and other differences they will encounter in the business world.

CONCLUSION

Through its focus on the theoretical aspects of collaboration, ENG 4090 fills a gap in students’ preparation to become professional writers. They can take their knowledge of professional writing and apply it to the group-writing contexts they will encounter on the job. My hope is that they will not join the 61 percent of Ede and Lunsford’s sample who felt unprepared for collaborating at work.5
NOTES

1 Martha Thomas, of the Center for Business Communication at the University of South Carolina’s Darla Moore School of Business, gave me this assignment.

2 While this section focuses on the importance of collaboration in business contexts, there is a similar push for recognizing the importance of collaboration in academia. For more details, see Damrosch, Sullivan, and Arac, among others.

3 If necessary, I direct students to sections of our textbook, or we review topics based on the students’ needs.

4 For a more detailed discussion of how students who participate in collaborative projects tend to define fairness, see my article, “Avoiding the Black Dot: Fair Grading of Collaborative Writing.”

5 I would like to thank Charles Nelson and Sally Chandler for their feedback on an earlier draft of this essay. I would also like to thank the students who gave me permission to quote from their process logs.

WORKS CITED


Faigley, Lester, and Thomas Miller. “What We Learn from Writing on the Job.” College English 44.6 (1982): 557-69.


ENGLISH 4090: COLLABORATIVE WRITING AT WORK

COURSE DESCRIPTION AND POLICIES

Collaborative writing, the creation of one document by multiple authors, is an important part of most professionals’ lives. Surveys conducted by researchers Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford found that 87 percent of respondents spent part of their time working in groups. Ede and Lunsford also state that 61 percent of their respondents felt their education failed to adequately prepare them to write collaboratively. This course aims to meet that need, providing you with the theory and practice needed to create effective documents as part of a group. You will be placed in a group with 2-3 other students and asked to create a series of documents for various professional situations. We will also discuss theoretical articles on collaborative writing and group process, giving you the information needed to adapt to most group situations.

I designed this course under the assumption that students have fulfilled the prerequisites: College Composition (ENG 1030, 1031/1032, or 1033/1034), and either Business and Professional (ENG 3090) or Technical (ENG 3091) Writing. While we will review some of the concepts covered in those courses, I will not reteach them. Please talk with me as soon as possible if you are concerned about your ability to complete the work required for this course. Because this course emphasizes group work, please let me know if you plan to drop the course, so I can make any changes to the groups that are necessary.

REQUIRED TEXTS AND MATERIALS

- Readings on reserve in the library (some may need to be photocopied and brought to class).
- A computer disc—IBM format (bring to every class). You can also use a flash drive or similar storage device.
- An email account (Kean gives you one for free; you can also get an account with a different provider).
- Professional dress for your oral presentation (needed for last class):
  - For men, this means a dark suit, white shirt, conservative tie, and dark shoes.
  - For women, this means a dark suit (either a dress or pants) and dark shoes.
ASSIGNMENTS

Your final grade will be based on the cumulative point total you earn completing assignments in the following categories. The exact number of points in each category and the overall total for the course may change as the semester develops.

**Short Documents**—(80 points) These assignments will ask you to create one- to two-page documents in response to specific situations. Some, you will write as an individual; others, with your group. The specific assignments, and their total possible points, are:

- Introductory memo (individual) 0
- Reaction memo (individual; see memo on this assignment for more details) 10
- WebCT scavenger hunt (individual or collaborative) 5
- In-class project one: evaluating proposals (collaborative) 10
- Group assessment memo (individual) 10
- In-class project two: visuals (collaborative) 20
- Persuasive letter (collaborative) 20
- Group assessment email (individual) 10

**Relocation Project**—(120 points) This project involves the creation of several collaboratively written documents in response to a set of interconnected situations. The total possible points for each are:

- Mission Statement 10
- Proposal 10
- Informal report evaluating sources for the brochure 20
- Progress report 10
- Brochure 50
- Oral presentation 20

See the memo given out during the first class for more information on this assignment.

**Process Log**—(100 points) Good writers are consciously reflective: they think about what they have done, evaluate how effective their rhetorical choices were, and speculate on different approaches they could take in a similar situation. This reflection is doubly important when working with a group. Not only does a writer have to be aware of his or her own writing process, but he or she must figure out a way to make that process work with the processes of their colleagues. As a result, you will keep a log of what you do as well as your thoughts about how your group is working. See the memo on this assignment for more information.
Peer Evaluation—(100 points) Because this course focuses on collaborative writing, your ability to work in a group is essential, and you will be evaluated on it. While I will stay involved in your group’s work, I will not know each member’s level of participation as well as each of you will. You will have the opportunity to review (and be reviewed by) each member of your group at least twice this semester, in addition to the group assessments you will write.

Class Participation—(100 points) I hope this class will become a community of writers, providing praise for good writing, suggestions for pieces that aren’t working as well as they could, and support through the difficulties that are part of writing. As a result, I expect everyone to be present, attentive, polite, and involved in all aspects of the class.

FINAL GRADE

Your final grade will be calculated by adding the points you earn and dividing that sum by the total possible points you could have earned. I will convert the percentage to a letter grade using this chart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>100-95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>94-90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>89-87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>86-83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B-</td>
<td>82-80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C+</td>
<td>79-76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>75-72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>71-61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>60% and lower</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

REVISION

In the professional world, a successful document is rarely created after just one attempt. You will write a draft and give it to your supervisor, who will request (read: demand) revisions, which you will try to make. This cycle may repeat several times. To model this, you and/or your group can revise up to three graded documents of your choice (excluding the introductory memo, WebCT scavenger hunt, persuasive letter, brochure, and any document submitted more than two days after the due date) for a higher grade. You can revise each of these documents up to four times.

The first revision of any document is due no later than one week after I return the original. I will record the higher grade (whether original or revision[s]) as the final grade. Revisions will not be accepted after Week 14.

I will offer suggestions for revisions with every assignment. I also expect you to think of your own revision plans. You must let me know whether or not your group helps you revise. Everyone who works on a revision will earn the changed grade for it.

[The policies section of the syllabus also contained information on the attendance policy, submitting work, using WebCT, and academic dishonesty]
SCHEDULE

Week 1
Course introduction. Personal introduction. Overview of major assignments. Introductory memo.

HW:

Week 2

HW:

Week 3

HW:

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1 In general, students were told to only read as much of Alred’s book as necessary to remind themselves of the principles of professional writing, though I did require them to look more carefully at some sections.

**Week 4**  
**Proposals. Group conflict. Work on mission statement**  
**HW:** Finish mission statement. Read material to prepare for in-class project one (given out in class).

**Week 5**  
**Mission statement due. In-class project one: evaluating proposals. Time to work on proposal. Group assessment memo discussed.**  
**HW:** Prepare draft of proposal for workshop. Finish group assessment memo. Read “The Concept of Authorship: Explorations and (Dis)Closures” by Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford (on reserve; reaction memo assignment) (Source: Singular Texts: Plural Authors: Perspectives on Collaborative Writing p. 72-102).

**Week 6**  
**Group assessment memo one due. Collaboration and authorship. Proposal workshop. Time to revise proposal.**  

**Week 7**  
**Proposal due. Source report discussed. Modes of collaboration. Research.**  

**Week 8**  
**HW:** Work on source report. Send copy to other group by deadline set by class.
Week 9
Class will meet on WebCT. Workshop source report. Work on revisions for source report.

Week 10
HW: Prepare for in-class project two.

Week 11
In-class project two: visuals. Time to work on progress report.

Week 12
HW: Send group assessment email to me. Prepare draft of persuasive letter. Read in Alred “Brochures” (p. 58-62), “Presentations” (p. 396-405)

Week 13

Week 14
Persuasive letter due. Workshop brochure. Sign up for oral presentations. Collaborative writing in business situations revisited. Catch-up/Workday. Revisions will not be accepted after this date.
HW: Prepare for oral presentation. Finish brochure.

Week 15
The full-text versions of all Book Reviews are now available online, with a new search feature that allows you to browse by author, title, reviewer, or issue.

The following reviews for this issue appear exclusively online:


Book Reviews


Reviewed by Shevaun E. Watson, University of South Carolina

Jacqueline Bacon’s new and comprehensive history of *Freedom’s Journal* is a welcome addition to African American rhetoric studies, and to the field of rhetoric and composition more generally. *Freedom’s Journal: The First African-American Newspaper* follows on the heels of Bacon’s important study of abolitionist rhetoric, *The Humblest May Stand Forth*. In *Freedom’s Journal*, she turns her attention to the rhetorical dimensions of the early black press, linking this newspaper to antislavery efforts but also situating it within other meaningful contexts. Perhaps the greatest contribution of Bacon’s study is her multilayered analysis of the newspaper, whereby through meticulous archival research she elaborates the biographical, historical, political, and social aspects of *Freedom’s Journal*’s success, demise, and lasting significance. As Bacon herself acknowledges, other useful studies of *Freedom’s Journal* exist, but important questions and lines of inquiry about this seminal paper have remained. She builds expertly on the groundwork laid by others, expanding readers’ field of vision for understanding *Freedom’s Journal* while also refusing “to be the last word” on the subject (6-9). Those familiar with nineteenth-century African American rhetoric will appreciate this detailed history and deft analysis; others will welcome an engaging discussion of the era and some of its key black rhetors.

The book is organized into three sections. Part 1 provides important historical and rhetorical background. In chapter 1, Bacon offers what might be the most useful and succinct discussion of northern black communities, 1780-1830, currently available to rhetoric scholars. This period in African American rhetorical history is little known, so its inclusion here not only contextualizes the appearance of *Freedom’s Journal* in 1827, but more importantly, provides a much-needed introduction to black rhetoric and politics during and after the Revolution. Chapters 2 and 3 discuss the exact circumstances and goals of the paper’s genesis. What Bacon makes so clear and interesting in this section is the varied exigencies and objectives of *Freedom’s Journal*: not solely an abolitionist instrument, Bacon argues, the paper was devoted to other, larger causes, such as social justice in the broadest terms, as well as the development of community identity and black consciousness. *Freedom’s Journal* provided local, national, and international news of interest and import to African Americans, while it also offered an array of information about black schools, businesses, organizations, and events. Bacon illustrates quite convincingly that, above all, the newspaper functioned as a highly accessible form of rhetorical education for free blacks.
and even for slaves. The editors, Samuel Cornish and John Russwurm, sought to promote debate rather than establish consensus on key issues of the day. By allowing the expression of diverse points of view, *Freedom's Journal* "[featured] models of strong persuasion by African Americans, [and . . . demonstrated] the link between rhetorical expertise and public activism" (84-85).

Part 2 traces the paper’s “dialogic” treatment of the subjects most pressing to antebellum blacks: self-help, morality, and racial uplift (chapter 4); gender roles, masculinity, and womanhood (chapter 5); Africa and Haiti (chapter 6); colonization and emigration (chapter 7); and slavery and abolition (chapter 8). Bacon finds that in each case, the post-revolutionary African American community was far from monolithic in its sentiments, experiences, and struggles. Bacon does exquisite justice to the complexity of black communities at the time: there was “unity without uniformity” (6). She shows, for instance, that self-help rhetoric was part of a larger, ongoing debate among African Americans about the relationship between racism and moral behavior: “was prejudice due to condition (behavior or morality) or to color (the fact of being black in a white racist society)?” (101). Blacks disagreed about strategies to combat racism and build community, rendering vocabularies of “character” and “elevation” to be quite varied in political inflection. African Americans’ views of gender were equally complex. Here Bacon carefully parses out shifting definitions of black masculinity and womanhood, linking them to a range of communal and political interests.

Similarly, Bacon demonstrates the various ways in which Africa and Haiti operated in the antebellum black imagination. In the pages of *Freedom's Journal*, African Americans articulated multiple significances of Africa and Haiti for their collective past, present, and future. Bacon is smart to separate the issues of colonization and emigration from discussions of Africa and Haiti. Though clearly related, these topics figured differently in the paper’s history and politics. Bacon describes *Freedom’s Journal* vexed and changing relationship with the American Colonization Society and emigration efforts, placing the paper at the center of this crucial cultural debate. Bacon treats with remarkable even-handedness Russwurm’s eventual endorsement of colonization and lifelong commitment to Liberia. Though Russwurm ultimately alienated many readers with his political views, Bacon shows the ways in which he helped the paper fulfill its larger rhetorical goals of promoting even contentious debate. By discussing slavery last, Bacon does not in any way diminish the paper’s involvement in early nineteenth-century abolitionism. Clearly a major vehicle for antislavery rhetoric, *Freedom's Journal* also offered free expression of competing proposals for abolition. That abolitionists themselves needed to remain “creative and flexible” was mirrored in the paper’s diversified coverage of slavery and its foes (241).

The third section of the book, chapter 9, makes a final argument for the powerful legacy of *Freedom's Journal*. Bacon takes this short-lived paper, which survived financial hardship, the departure of editor Samuel Cornish, and continual berating from some whites, and she uses it to elaborate the history of early African
American rhetoric. Bacon positions *Freedom's Journal* as a central—and transformative—component of antebellum black “life, letters, and activism”: “It gave voice to the concerns of African Americans about the issues that affected them and the nation . . . in ways that influenced black and white abolitionists and reformers” (252). Without pressing the argument too far, Bacon offers a most compelling case for why this newspaper deserves our attention. A vehicle of growing African American literacy, a complement to the burgeoning black literary societies, an instrument of antislavery efforts, and an important mode of rhetorical education, *Freedom's Journal* was groundbreaking in the struggle against oppression. Bacon achieves her aim of demonstrating its great influence without idealizing its editors and contributors or ignoring its faults and cleavages. Bacon has done a masterful job of providing a history of early black rhetoric and writing that gives agency to the African Americans themselves who wrote for, read, distributed, and discussed the paper. *Freedom's Journal* is essential reading as it expands our current understanding of the role of rhetoric in early African American politics and culture.

Columbia, SC

**Work Cited**


Reviewed by Amy Lynch-Biniek, Kutztown University

Before I began writing this review, I did some homework: I read at least a dozen other reviews published in *Composition Studies*. I was aiming to understand the style, structure, and other textual conventions of the medium. According to Anne Beaufort’s new text, this skill in analyzing the norms of a discourse community is precisely what students of freshman composition need.

In *College Writing and Beyond: A New Framework for University Writing Instruction*, Beaufort presents the results of a six-year study in which she followed the writing development of Tim, encompassing his four undergraduate years as a double major in history and engineering. The study included interviews with Tim and with his freshman composition teacher, Carla, as well as analysis of the feedback he received on written work in composition and in first-year through advanced courses in history and engineering. Beaufort follows up on Tim for two years after graduation, learning about the writing he does on the job as an engineer,
as well as his changing views of writing. Beaufort states the purpose of her study as examining a question that has frustrated academics since the genesis of the field: “why graduates of freshman writing cannot produce acceptable written documents in other contexts” (6). She wishes, moreover, to uncover data that could “build more coherent writing instruction at the post-secondary level” (6). The issue at the heart of the matter is transfer of learning, something she finds lacking throughout Tim’s college experience. Under consideration as well, I believe, is a larger question: Just what is the purpose of freshman composition?

While she focuses on the transfer of writing skills across the disciplines Tim studies, Beaufort clearly evokes what is perhaps the most important debate surrounding freshman composition. What is it that a composition class should do? The field has long manifested a variety of answers, including instruction in a set of “universal” writing skills; introduction to a “general” academic discourse; writing in individual majors; appreciation for literary forms and language; and practice in the principles of rhetoric. Beaufort suggests that even composition courses that employ a variety of approaches tend to leave students like Tim without a clear sense of what to do when faced with writing tasks that do not share the same sensibilities as their composition teachers.

Beaufort admits the danger of drawing any generalizable conclusions from the study of a single student (7); indeed, Carla notes this concern in the Epilogue, in which she and Beaufort reflect on the experience of the study. Nevertheless, many teachers will recognize Tim and the difficulties he faces in adjusting to writing in multiple contexts. Moreover, her small if long-term study marks a good beginning—Beaufort notes throughout chapter 1 the dearth of longitudinal research of student writing knowledge and progress.

While she appears primarily in chapter 3 and the Epilogue, I found Carla the most intriguing figure in the text. Frankly, I have been Carla, as have the majority of us teaching composition today. Carla was originally and primarily schooled in literature studies—Beaufort calls her a “poet”—yet finds herself teaching composition. Her employment mirrors that of the profession as a whole: despite the growth of graduate programs in composition, the CCCC Committee on Part-time / Adjunct Issues reported in 2001 that the bulk of classes are still taught by part-time employees, adjuncts, and graduate assistants, even in free-standing writing programs (340). This majority is, like Carla, lacking significant study in composition. That Carla expresses some defensiveness in the post-study interview comes as no surprise; she is a hard-working teacher trying earnestly to learn and perform in an area outside her expertise.

Beaufort seems to avoid directly addressing the issue of the who’s who of composition teaching, but occasional pointed remarks make clear her take on it. In chapter 2 she notes that at the institution where the study took place, “the writing program was overseen . . . by faculty who were not part of the professional community of composition and rhetoric scholars” and that those teaching composition had limited time and resources for studying the field (31). This, Beaufort says, was
“a contributing factor in the delivery of instruction” (31). She observes, moreover, that Carla focused her class on writing genres in the humanities, such as the literary nonfiction essay. Such assignments, she finds, did not prepare Tim for genres in history and engineering. In fact, she notes the confusion Tim experiences as he tries to apply standards of the composition class in new contexts. Rather than recognizing that a different discipline may have different standards, he initially blames the teachers or the assignments for his difficulty in adjusting. I appreciate Beaufort’s implications here, but I wish she had taken the opportunity to say directly what so few are willing to say: that composition might best be taught by compositionists. Still, I understand her subtle approach to this issue—I have been wary of saying as much in committee and department meetings, worried that I might alienate the literature-dominated faculty.

Beaufort returns instead to the issue of how a composition class might best be structured to ensure that students learn concepts and skills that can indeed be transferred to the work they do in any context. Her analysis depends heavily on the concept of discourse communities. Acknowledging the critiques of discourse communities in composition scholarship, she nonetheless sees it as the best framework for the transfer of learning. Her description of Tim’s introduction to the history and engineering discourse communities (notably without much in the way of explicit writing instruction from teachers in either discipline) does well to demonstrate the real differences that exist among disciplines in the knowledge domains of writing process, subject matter, rhetoric, and genre. I could not argue with her claim that little of what Tim learned about writing in his composition class would be useful in his future writing. This does not seem to reflect on the capabilities of his composition instructor, for whom Beaufort repeatedly expresses respect; instead, it suggests that writing curriculum and staffing have become too detached from composition research into the acquisition of literacy.

Composition instructors who rely on a version of current-traditional rhetoric or employ traditional literary nonfiction models may feel defensive in the face of Beaufort’s claims. She is not alone in her call for curricular reform, however. For instance, she compares her focus on teaching the analysis of discourse communities to what David Smit calls “rhetorical flexibility.” Indeed, Beaufort often refers to Smit’s The End of Composition Studies. While the curricular proposals in Smit’s text differ in many ways from Beaufort’s suggestions, she does seem to be addressing what Smit calls “[t]he problem facing composition studies as a field,” namely, “how to respond to the substantial picture of what we know” about learning to write (181). Beaufort’s response is to teach students the analytical and meta-cognitive skills necessary to discover and learn the conventions of any discourse community.

The author provides an appendix filled with ideas for implementing this approach, including activities, suggested reading, assignments, and a course outline developed along with Dana Driscoll. Many of the assignments may seem familiar to compositionists. In fact, I began to feel the target audience of this text
might be administrators, specifically those who persist in the attitude that anyone who writes well is well equipped to teach writing, and that any practice in writing is academically valuable practice. Beaufort makes a convincing case that composition programs should more carefully consider what practices do and do not translate into writing beyond the composition classroom door. For those teachers and scholars searching for a unified purpose for composition, Beaufort offers an intriguing answer.

Kutztown, PA

WORKS CITED


Reviewed by Larken McCord, Georgia State University

From its title alone, *Preventing Plagiarism* appears to have an agenda. This is not the text to waste time interrogating the scope of plagiarism in all its forms or parsing any nuance concerning intellectual property or discourse conformity: Plagiarism has been identified as the problem, and this book will help instructors get rid of it. Speaking from a dual vantage point as a high school teacher and an adjunct professor at New York University, Laura Hennessey DeSena offers a wealth of experience from which to find solutions to the plagiarism problem. Upon reading the book, however, it appears that her project is bigger than plagiarism, if not adjacent to it altogether. The book DeSena wanted to write is actually about originality of expression and the use of freewriting exercises to engage this originality. The art of preventing plagiarism occupies an afterthought status throughout the book. Though it could well be argued that preventing plagiarism should not be foregrounded in the minds of writing instructors, the disconnect between DeSena’s argument and the argument expected by her readers obscures the book’s strongest ideas.

Chapter 1 (“The Rewards of Original Thinking”) announces DeSena’s purpose: moving students away from reductive, redundant writing to original critical thinking. The tone of the chapter borders on sanctimonious, particularly
when DeSena establishes the primary dichotomy of her book: book reports versus literary analysis. This introductory chapter is followed by the longest in the book (“First Things First: Emphasizing Primary over Secondary Sources”). DeSena devotes nearly a third of her text to describing her approach to literary research in the classroom. This approach emphasizes freewriting exercises as a means of exploring student reaction and interpretation to literature. Indeed, her emphasis is largely confined to writing about literature. Her extended discussion of privileging primary over secondary sources applies most directly to this arena of academic writing. When she attempts to relate the primary versus secondary source issue to other disciplines, the results feel forced. DeSena appears to think freewriting is a panacea for writing woes. She spends the better part of chapter 4 (“Strategies for Avoiding Plagiarism”) discussing student examples, identifying aspects of successful freewriting. Grounded firmly in expressionist pedagogy, she believes in the potential for this activity to engage the thinking of any student. Somewhat surprising, then, is the overall lack of emphasis on the student in chapter 4. DeSena points out that most instances of plagiarism are the result of weak assignments. While there might be some truth in this “blame the victim” mentality, the focus on the teacher feels unfair. Her first tip for avoiding plagiarism involves developing more precise topics. She reveals some of her own unorthodox topics and encourages her readers to open themselves to the myriad possibilities for innovative assignments. Absent from the discussion is any suggestion that students be involved in the development of topics for writing. For all the emphasis on freewriting, it seems that ultimately, the students will be asked to use their original insights in service to someone else’s project. Seen in this light, her earlier statement that teachers must “break down conventional thinking, which leads to tedious writing” (18) refers exclusively to teachers’ thinking, rather than that of our students.

The weakest moments in the text are the chapters most directly connected to plagiarism. These chapters feel stale and removed from the rest of DeSena’s project. Chapter 3 (“Working Definitions of Plagiarism”) delineates a concise understanding of plagiarism separated into two categories: source of information plagiarism and source of language plagiarism. This construction neatly presents the problem and makes it feel manageable. DeSena reassures the reader that most student plagiarism issues are source of language problems arising from boundary confusion between the student’s voice and those of the sources. Chapter 5 (“The Proper Integration of Sources”) promises to address the issues raised in chapter 3. Disappointingly, this five-page chapter punts the topic back to the MLA handbook after a brief but promising paragraph discussing voice in research. Chapter 6 (“Tools for Identifying Plagiarism”) offers very little original insight. DeSena admonishes her readers to read student essays carefully and thoroughly, for example. She goes into great detail about the efficacy of Boolean search engines to track down the sources of plagiarism. Tips about how to frame an Internet search seem geared to the most technophobic teachers. DeSena also endorses products such as Turnitin.
com without investigating any of its implications for classroom dynamics. Ironically, DeSena had previously presented thoughtful arguments for and against the practice of having students turn in copies of their sources including the air of distrust that such a practice can create. To ignore similar implications surrounding the use of tools such as Turnitin.com makes the chapter feel unconnected to the rest of the text. Indeed, each of these chapters feels suspiciously like an addendum tacked on to enhance the plagiarism angle of the book as a whole.

The gem of the book, the final chapter presents a wealth of information about multicultural students and plagiarism. Nowhere else in the book does DeSena suggest anything other than the monolithic Western idea that originality in writing is sacrosanct and that writers must use propriety in using sources. While her response to these differences involves making a more concerted effort to help non-native writers conform to Western ideals, this awareness of alternative perspectives illuminates an area for further research.

At the heart of DeSena’s text is an earnest hopefulness, a belief that all students have unique subjective voices and that they will want to share those voices in their own writing. As compelling as this vision is, DeSena’s practical techniques would likely meet significant resistance from all but the most adroit students. One of her examples of modeling, for example, uses the study of Joyce’s “Araby” as an exemplar of establishing voice and perspective (105). She admits that using fiction as a model for academic writing can be problematic, but asserts that the potential rewards are worth it. Lacking, however, is a discussion of how to make such a model accessible for students. Similarly, she admonishes teachers not to introduce secondary interpretations of literature too early as students are studying those texts. She avoids any discussion of how to prevent students from seeking such assistance on their own. Many of these weaknesses stem from DeSena’s enmeshment of the meaning-making tasks involved with interpreting texts and the generative, creative tasks involved in writing. In her cosmography, the English classroom must engage both sets of tasks simultaneously.

It would be unfortunate, of course, to dismiss the book simply as a result of this somewhat unrealistic construction. Many of DeSena’s classroom practices reveal fresh and promising angles which might apply to a variety of tasks. Her unusual approach to outlining emphasizes its creative potential. She describes an activity in which students cut up the outlines they’ve prepared and rearrange them, forcing them to look at different possibilities for organization (18). She also suggests having student create multiple outlines for the same topic, varying the presentation of ideas and considering their options as writers (84). These practices coincide nicely with pedagogies that seek to expand student awareness of their own power as writers. In her extensive discussions of freewriting exercises, DeSena mentions the practice of having students highlight their own freewriting to trace the development of ideas (78). This metacognitive step could demystify the generative process. DeSena provides a very useful set of questions to help students analyze scholarly writing, a daunting yet essential task (23). Sprinkled throughout
the text, these subtle practices—which may or may not have anything to do with plagiarism—reveal DeSena’s most provocative insights.

DeSena has taken on an unwieldy audience: high school teachers. With a foot presumably in both secondary and postsecondary camps, she has a unique vantage point and her perspective should be welcome. Unfortunately, her tone often suggests some condescension. When teachers talk to each other, most adopt a tone of collegiality, even employing self-deprecation and a “we’re all in this together” aura. DeSena’s tone, more often than not, is didactic, as if the reader is a student of sorts. She uses the imperative mood frequently to address her imagined audience of stagnant educators. She even breaks the formality of her prose to say, parenthetically, “I hope to convince you to stop assigning book reports.” Who is assigning this phantom book report, and by extension, whom does DeSena think she is convincing? In nearly a decade of teaching (and almost two decades of being a student), I have yet to see the kind of book report assignment vilified in this text. These lapses make DeSena feel removed from her audience, which is ironic since she is a practitioner.

Despite the chasm between the author and the reader, the book succeeds in presenting a good deal of information in a brisk, efficient manner. Instructors could easily glean some innovative ideas from the text in one reading. Those ideas, of course, are not as connected to plagiarism as one might hope given the title. Perhaps we should not be surprised at this. Academics have been wringing their hands about the plagiarism problem for the better part of a century yet the conversation remains largely unchanged. DeSena cleverly uses the current anti-plagiarism momentum to propose a particular philosophy of writing instruction. This connection is not misplaced; many of the classroom activities described would certainly curb academic dishonesty. To emphasize this connection, even at the expense of some of the book’s finer points, is misleading.

Atlanta, GA


Reviewed by Katherine Mack, University of California, Irvine

David Foster’s *Writing with Authority: Students’ Roles as Writers in Cross-National Perspective* speaks to two concerns that writing teachers and administrators share: first, how to foster autonomous, independent, and recursive thinking and writing practices in students, and, second, how to initiate them into a scholarly conversation based on the intersubjective, relational nature of knowledge-making. Foster offers the term “transformative writing” to describe this pedagogical process and goal, arguing that it “enable[s] students to write in the role of knowledge-
makers in specific knowledge contexts”(115). Using the insights that he gained from his comparative study of German and American university students and the systems within which they write, he offers specific suggestions about the ways in which instructors and writing administrators can promote transformative writing in the American context. The most compelling and actionable of these suggestions addresses the temporality of both students’ writing habits and of the curriculum, a suggestion encapsulated in the book’s concluding pedagogical appeal: “American teachers should expect more from their students as self-directed, long-term planners and writers and should construct tasks based on those expectations” (181).

Activity theory and the methods of the “New Literacy Studies” provide the theoretical framework for Foster’s comparative study, which seeks to situate the German and American student writers within their disciplinary, institutional, and socio-cultural contexts. Foster compares five pairs of German and American students whose discipline and level of study are roughly parallel, and whose universities, Rhineland and Midwestern, differ mainly in size. His data consists of students’ descriptions of their writing practices, which he gathered through multiple, semi-structured interviews and students’ writers’ memos. Foster also observed the students’ writing practices in and outside of the classroom, interviewed instructors about their pedagogical and writing goals for the class, and reviewed the two institutions’ planning documents and policies. Foster is careful to note that his case studies are suggestive, not representative, of the socio-cultural dynamics that shape students’ writing practices and identities. His multi-faceted approach results in richly-detailed case studies that respect the uniqueness of the students’ experiences, and yet also explore the ways in which they reflect the instructor’s pedagogy and the broader university system.

The “Introduction” and chapter 2, “Studying Student Writers in Cross-National Contexts,” explore the different roles that German and American student’s writing plays in their secondary schooling, their access to university, and their intellectual development while at the university. “Early selectivity and differentiated goal-orientation” (29) characterize the German education system in which students decide as early as age eleven whether they will pursue a vocational or university education. Switching tracks is possible, but not easy, as students on the university track (gymnasium) begin preparing for the arbiter, the major exit exam, several years before they take it. Successful completion of the arbiter gains them entrance to any German university that offers their field of specialization. German students, unlike their American counterparts, begin their discipline-specific course of study and take seminar courses that require research papers in their first year. They also determine whether they will take a course for credit or audit, and whether they would like to retake a course for a new grade. Though German universities do publish expected time-to-degree-completion schedules, they do not enforce them rigorously. From the outset, then, German students enjoy a particular type of autonomy, which Foster describes as “self-direction and self-management in learning, signifying self-direction, freedom, and responsibility in knowledge-building”(26).
While Foster acknowledges problems with aspects of German pedagogy and curricular design, such as the lack of repeated feedback from professors on students’ writing throughout the course, he nevertheless values its fostering of students’ academic ethos: their sense of belonging to and participation within the knowledge-building community of their discipline and the academy at large.

Foster helpfully reminds readers of the ways in which the American system contrasts with the German. The first and second years of an American university typically consist of general education and some introduction-to-the-disciplines courses. American students are expected to take courses for credit; in most instances, the university frowns on extensions and incompletes. The majority of courses require frequent, varied, and shorter writings, similar to those assigned in high school, rather than extended research projects that require students to structure their writing schedules. Foster implicitly critiques this lack of differentiation, arguing that the transition to university should challenge students to think and write differently, as it does for German students.

Chapter 3, “The Work of Writing: Student Authorship Roles in Cross-National Perspective,” examines the “zoning of institutional time in relation to students’ practices as writers” (61). Though the semester durations of Rhineland and Midwestern universities are similar, American students experience writing as a series of deadline-driven assignments embedded within the evaluative structure of the quarter or semester system. German universities, in contrast, offer “a systemic tolerance for students’ variable learning time frames” (62). As long as students can afford to do so, they can take as many semesters as they need to finish their coursework. Moreover, whereas American students tend to conceive of the winter and summer breaks between semesters as vacation time, German students do not perceive a rigid distinction between the lecture and non-lecture periods of the academic year. Their personal writing patterns, not the institutional demands of the university, shape their schedules. Foster argues that professors’ flexibility with deadlines reinforces students’ independence as writers and their sense of membership within the knowledge field.

Chapters 4 to 6 elaborate respectively on the shaping, teaching, and institutionalization of transformative pedagogies and writing practices. Chapter 4 acknowledges American’s students’ familiarity with, and yet underutilization, of recursive writing strategies. Frequent, instructor-imposed deadlines encourage short-burst writing rather than cumulative rethinking and revision. In addition, American students tend not to acknowledge or engage competing interpretations, favoring instead analyses based on their own perspective or opinion. To address these obstacles to the development of transformative writing, Foster establishes three priorities for teachers: first, to assign extended writing projects in which students are responsible for establishing research and writing goals, and that provide multiple opportunities for teacher feedback; second, to incorporate the expectation that students’ writings will engage the perspectives and arguments of other members of the knowledge community; and, third, to use the time afforded by the long-term assignment to promote
students’ reflection, rethinking, and reformulation of their writing. In chapter 5, Foster provides pedagogical strategies and suggestions for course designs derived from two project-based courses that he taught. His description of the two course syllabi, and balanced analysis of several examples of student writings in them, effectively concretizes the abstract pedagogical principles and goals that he posited in the previous chapter. Chapter 6 addresses institutional and program-level administrators who seek to promote the teaching of transformative writing at the institutional level. Foster recommends the institution of variable credit seminar courses that are writing-intensive at all levels of study. He further suggests incorporating extended, cumulative writing projects into already existing courses across the curriculum. Finally, he advises educating faculty about the value of long-term writing assignments so that they consider revising their course schedule and assignments accordingly.

Foster’s study invites further research. Scholars might investigate the effect of the differences in secondary preparation, and of the cultural value of intellectualism, on German and American students’ writing practices. The fact that Germans decide at a much younger age to pursue the university preparatory track; that their gymnasium degree is more equivalent to an associate’s degree than a high school diploma; and, that they are slightly older than their American counterparts, might make them better prepared to engage in transformative writing. Foster’s study might thus provoke a rethinking of writing pedagogy in American secondary schools as well as universities. Future researchers might also interview students about the value they place on their university education, and what they hope to get—either materially or intellectually—from it. If, as I suspect, intellectualism and scholarship occupy the same hallowed status in Germany that rugged individualism and economic success do in the United States, these cultural priorities must affect students’ approaches to their university education.

That his comparative analysis could go deeper does not diminish the importance of Writing With Authority. Foster’s study and resulting recommendations reinforce the best practices advocated by WAC and WID researchers in our field. I recently collaborated on a multi-phase, qualitative research study of undergraduate student writers at my public, research-one university. Our primary interest was the transferability of writing knowledge, a topic that Foster’s study does not explicitly address. Notwithstanding these different foci, our findings are similar. Like Foster, we concluded that students are more likely to develop and maintain a rhetorical understanding of writing as situated and specific, rather than as a set of generic and universalizable norms of academic discourse, when instructors at all levels teach disciplinary specific norms, genres, and vocabulary, and require that students’ writings reflect that knowledge. Foster’s reflections on the ways in which long-term, multi-phased, and research-driven projects can enable the development of this kind of disciplinary-specific writing knowledge take us one step closer to enacting this important shift in writing pedagogy.

Irvine, CA

128 Composition Studies
Imagine a writing center where unexpected troubles lead to impromptu learning, where time follows rhythms rather than clocks, where tutors knit scarves and write journals during paid hours, where a commitment to diversity includes anti-racist activism, and where leadership involves pushing past the familiar to embrace risks and a Trickster habit of mind. This imagining is not only what the authors of *The Everyday Writing Center: A Community of Practice* do, but it is also what they ask readers to do along with them. Collaborators Anne Ellen Geller, Michele Eodice, Frankie Condon, Meg Carroll, and Elizabeth H. Boquet articulate a new theory for writing center practice grounded in Etienne Wenger’s conception of “a community of practice,” or a learning culture that invites question-asking, acknowledges conflict, and values “meaningful discomfort” (22). By combining qualitative research with deep theoretical and interdisciplinary engagement, the authors show that imaginative dreaming can become part of the everyday—they show what is not only possible but also probable and productive about writing center practice.

*The Everyday Writing Center* is organized into seven chapters, each expanding the theoretical base and revealing practical implications of a new and challenging framework for writing centers. In the introduction, the authors characterize the current state of writing centers as too narrowly focused on tutor training, with handbooks as containing, rather than opening, our knowledge of one-on-one tutoring. They are concerned about a commoditization of knowledge and a dull, repetitive use of prescriptive tutoring strategies. Drawing on Max DePree’s assertion that “the health of an organization is inversely proportional to the size of the manual” (qtd. 8), the authors explain, “We worry about the degree to which the neatly-packaged representation of our rich, multi-layered everyday writing center lives becomes a set of ‘symbolic practices that substitute for action all too easily’”(8). What, then, might allow for more authentic, complex representation and understandings of writing center practice?

The remaining chapters identify conditions that support relational, creative practice. In chapter 2, “Trickster at Your Table,” the authors argue for cultivating a Trickster mindset that welcomes uncertainty, disorder, and change. Learning to see through “Coyote eyes,” they argue, will allow writing center directors to recognize contradictions, to avoid binaries, and to cross boundaries. To counter the claim that there is not enough time for this puzzling, improvisational practice, Geller et al. explore in chapter 3 how “our use of time and our conception of time can change and can be changed for the better” (32): for example, by rethinking our time spent checking emails, observing tutorials, or setting goals. The authors look specifically
at how time can serve as an excuse and prevent us from doing what matters. This chapter on time, in my mind, is a real strength of the book, as skeptical readers would likely claim that there is not enough time for what the authors propose. By tackling the question of time early in *The Everyday Writing Center*, the authors ask all of us to think carefully about our priorities.

Turning next to a focus on developing communities of practice, chapters 4 and 5 discuss tutors as learners and as writers, respectively. Using not only Wenger’s model but also John Tagg’s research on “learning paradigms,” the authors argue for a “pro-learning culture” that involves all members of writing centers in shaping and understanding practice. They articulate the power of “framing and naming” for redefining our work (54); understand tutors’ identities “in motion” through new learning and knowledge construction (53); and argue for a pedagogy of “becoming” rather than as a display of “being” knowledgeable (59). Because a community of practice involves the relationship of the self to others, of constructing and understanding identity over time and within social organizations, the authors are careful to consider issues of diversity throughout the text and of race particularly in chapter 6, “Everyday Racism: Anti-racism Work and Writing Center Practice.” This chapter, perhaps more than any other, helps to ground the theoretical conversations in tangible, lived experience and provides concrete suggestions for discussing racism and making institutional change. Appendix material to chapter 6 includes valuable definitions and recommended readings. Finally, in chapter 7, the authors turn to leadership and “everyday administration,” asserting that leadership must mean more than a job description or title within a structure. Instead, functional leaders are change-agents who question their mission, face challenges with passion and commitment, seek opportunities to collaborate with others, and focus on institutional transformation. In this sense, leadership becomes a process of “mattering” (125) and follows a high-risk/high-yield model.

For the field of composition and rhetoric, *The Everyday Writing Center* is groundbreaking for its shared authorship and community of practice framework. In an innovative, five-way collaboration, the authors speak with a collective voice that embodies writing center practice across local contexts. The collaboration itself allows the authors to achieve their aim of speaking across varied institutions, student and tutor populations, writing center missions and goals, and levels of resources and support. Through their writing and research process, Geller et al. engage in and model for readers the community of practice they advocate for writing centers. At the same time, they invite readers into this community, opening a space for difficult dialogues and encouraging all of us who are committed to writing centers to reassess our values and everyday practice.

The methodological approach further qualifies this text as a significant contribution to the field. The authors achieve praxis in *The Everyday Writing Center* through wide reading and engagement across disciplines as well as collaborative, qualitative inquiry into their work as writing center directors. As they draw on varied disciplines, including organizational management, cultural geography,
education, folklore, and sociology, they introduce their intended readers—other writing center directors—to scholarship on learning paradigms, epochal time, and critical race theory, among other areas. In addition to these interdisciplinary approaches to learning and leadership, the authors use action research on their own practice, which they weave throughout the text. Illustrative examples come from tutors’ discussions and journals, activities during staff meetings, and artifacts, such as Tutorious Rex, a dinosaur that emerged from efforts to name a writing center superhero. Even as the authors share a number of tools for engaging tutors in staff education—from journal prompts and art assignments to experiments with time during tutorials and use of an inventory to discuss white privilege—they present these examples not as templates for building learning communities, but as case studies to be analyzed and questioned.

Because readers are welcomed into the authors’ community of practice, it seems only natural to pose questions with an aim toward improving weaknesses of the text. As a tutor reading *The Everyday Writing Center*, I wanted to hear more about what I could do—not only as a learner and writer, as discussed in chapters 4 and 5, but also a leader and researcher. What might tutor voices add to the conversation on communities of practice? Although the authors describe their research as “I-Search, We-Search and teacher research projects” (65), they do not explore the potential or rigors of qualitative research, particularly for informing one-on-one conferences. I wonder about the implications of teacher research and of the broader communities of practice framework for tutoring itself. Finally, I would have liked more attention to the bibliography, as some works quoted in chapter epigraphs and appendix materials are cited neither in the footnotes nor in the bibliography at the end. Because I found myself heavily annotating the text with plans to return to key passages and to identify further readings, I would have liked a complete list of references.

As a reader, I found *The Everyday Writing Center* to be catalytic—a book that sparked my thinking not only about writing centers but also about learning, teaching, writing, and leading. This book has much to say to all of us in composition and rhetoric, as it is really about being in community, engaging with others, and working against oppression and toward social justice. Geller et al. describe the work of functional leadership and investment in communities of practice as messy, risky, and uncomfortable but entirely exciting, worthwhile, and enriching, just as learning itself is all of these things. They present a hopeful, participatory vision for writing centers without being naïve or idealistic. I remain excited about the community of practice that is sure to develop as a result of *The Everyday Writing Center*, a book with staying power and insight for us all.

Madison, WI
As the title of this work indicates, this CD-ROM collection of essays features presentations from the 2004 Watson Conference. The conference, which featured the theme of “Writing at the Center,” invited presenters to explore current trends and theories in writing center studies.” In their introduction, co-editors Jo Ann Griffin, Carol Mattingly, and Michele Eodice note that “trends such as WAC, WID, and the budgetary divides” have seated writing centers at the “institutional table, and definitely at the center—not always of writing—but certainly of some of the most contentious power debates” in recent university history (ii). Their words are even more pertinent now that a couple of years have passed since these presentations were shared with the writing community. The pieces in this compilation reflect what the editors describe as the “core values” of their work, which they see as “support[ing] student retention, writing as learning, and writing for empowerment” (ii). They also explore questions that relate to the re-situation of writing centers from once-marginal positions to various points of centrality: physical, intellectual, and institutional. What happens as a discipline or field of study becomes institutionalized? How does its underlying theory change? Does our listening change as the voices we hear move into the center? What are the opportunities for research in writing center studies? Such issues involve everyone who teaches writing, and the contributors to this compilation offer insightful, challenging, and complex explorations of these questions, even as they raise other openings for future study and research.

(Having this material available on an inexpensive CD—proceeds benefit the Writing Centers Research Project—benefits users in several ways. Not only are CDs portable and lightweight, accessible from either Apple or PC computers, but the format of this work makes it ideal for reading, teaching, and research, reminding us that that content and authorship, not binding or format, make a work scholarly. Linked bookmarks facilitate easy navigation between articles, which are printable for reference and research. The search feature makes it possible to find words and/or phrases easily, while the user-friendly zoom in/out feature increases or decreases font size with just a click of the mouse, easing eyestrain. These are just some of the advantages of having this collection on CD—readers are sure to find more.)

This collection opens with an innovative look at writing centers, using the lenses of noted writers from the past and blending humor and seriousness in order to explore the challenges and opportunities of modern writing centers. While Elizabeth Boquet ponders the questions of myth creation and the loss and/or challenges to faith that often follow normative acceptance and institutionalization, Michele Eodice’s fascinating presentation of “Roland Barthes Says So” invites readers to follow an active hyperlink to an imaginative webcast postulation of Barthes visiting New York City’s
Brooklyn College Writing Center. In this rest of this section, writing center scholars imagine what it might be like to encounter Bakhtin, read correspondence written by Amelia Bloomer—a well-known nineteenth-century newspaper editor—and listen to a rousing speech by Frances Willard, President of the nineteenth century Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), all of which are framed within writing centers. The entries in the section represent the sort of achievements possible when imagination, collaboration, research, and writing synergistically work together.

There is some good stuff in the next section, “Foundations and Futures.” I use the word “stuff” quite deliberately, contemplating David Russell’s discussion “How to Keep from Getting Stuffed: Dig Through Old Stuff, Count Stuff, Watch Stuff, Talk to People about Stuff” (91). Russell analyzes the value of implementing both qualitative and quantitative methods of research as he encourages writing center administrators to dig into their archives to contribute scholarship to the history and theory of writing centers. Russell’s article complements and follows writing center guru Neil Lerner’s call for continued research into writing center practice and theory, “Seeking Knowledge about Writing Centers in Numbers, Talk, and Archives.” The possibilities for research into the history of writing centers are, in many institutions, projects-in-waiting. Lerner’s article explores the ways in which the “barriers” to effective writing center research—lack of resources, reliance on “lore” for expertise, and a hesitancy to accept writing centers as “entities with accepted research methodologies, controlling theories, and an ever-renewing supply of graduate students” to extend research—can be overcome (54-55). This section weaves together the past, present, and future of writing centers, as does Beth Burmester when she encourages listeners to think of the unique “space” of the writing center. Drawing on Ray Oldenburg’s concept of “third place,” a more relaxed, communicative, and open space (115), Burmester invites us to “envision writing centers as public spaces with multiple uses” (122). She notes, “[T]he third place designates those locations where we choose to go and where we are free from the obligations or responsibilities that may hamper our ability to reflect or act as we desire in either the first or second places” (130). Completing this section, Kathryn Dobson and William FitzGerald move from conventional conversational spaces and practices of writing centers to a more focused examination of what happens when unconventional genres present themselves in tutor/student sessions.

The third section, “Conversations across Programs,” invites readers to consider some of the theoretical aspects of writing center studies. In “Toward a Theory of Structure,” Barbara Schneider portrays the dynamic nature of the writing center, reflecting “an array of structures that materially displays Robert Barnett’s discussion of the political relationships of writing centers: ‘[the] socialization patterns between writing centers and their institutions are as diverse as the very missions that drive each center’” (163). Schneider’s article precedes a three-part symposium discussing the positive outcomes of joining three distinct “voices”—“teachers in composition classrooms, writers in creative writing courses, and writing center administrators and tutors”—in writing center space (184). Other essays in this group analyze the rise and fall of a Writing Fellows Program, examine ways of encouraging dialogue between
writing centers and first-year composition programs, and explore the concept of an intellectual “third space” (284).

The final set of essays, “Voices in/from/of the Center,” integrates voices of central figures who are often taken for granted in writing center studies—those of past and present tutors; they represent what the editors describe as “represent[ing] the essence of writing centers” (xiv). In “Within the University and Beyond,” they speak of the ways in which their work has helped them to progress in their academic and professional lives; for example, Jennifer Meitl notes, “the learning that takes place in this diverse atmosphere is evident in the conversations that occur each day” (320). In “Mobilizing the Center, Centering the Conversation,” Beth Godbee considers the “interpersonal dynamics of conferencing,” and explores the ways in which elements she researched in home tutoring integrate into writing center methodology to expand and enhance the effectiveness of institutional tutoring sessions (320). Finally, in an enlightening and moving essay, Pam Childers shares “The Talk I Didn’t Give at The Thomas R. Watson Conference,” in which she examines “the difficulties for teens attempting to self-identify as writers and the role writing centers can play in fostering positive agency in this age group” (ix). It is enlightening to juxtapose the reading of her article with the earlier one by Dobson and FitzGerald. They address the increasing presence of the personal statement in writing center work, and Childers discusses the importance of helping high-school seniors write college application essays that effectively convey a sense of the real person behind the brief yet influential essay. Both genres move beyond the conventional, traditional genres of writing center praxis, requiring innovative approaches.

This compilation ends with “Humor Us,” a brief bookend, or frame, set against the opening section of “Five Authors.” With a deftly satiric touch, Brad Hughes imagines a reporter’s lens trained on the various facets of the work done in writing centers by both directors and tutors. Kathy Bartlett closes the collection with a series of comical vignettes drawn from writing center scenes that resonate with anyone familiar with the ins and outs of the everyday writer center world.

In this compilation, humorous pieces act as bookends to the other essays in this work, and humor is an effective tool when one turns the lens onto oneself. One of the best features of the collection is the willingness of the authors to open up the conversation to consider such challenges as fostering student agency, admitting unconventional genres into writing center conversations, the challenges of institutionalization, and the demands of helping students whose first language is not English. I think of Phillip Gardner’s and William Ramsey’s 2005 article in The Writing Center Journal in which they advocate an understanding and appreciation of the “polyvalent” aspect of the work of writing centers. The articles and contributions in Writing from the Center illuminate this polyvalence and inspire us to continue to listen to conversations in, from, and about the center.

Atlanta, GA
Jennifer Sinor (Utah State University) and Rona Kaufman (Pacific Lutheran University) edit this collection of twenty-one personal essays that looks at the way that landscape and place shape who the contributors are as teachers, scholars, and citizens. The current drive for socially conscious and environmentally aware teaching fuels the development of place-based learning as an educational philosophy, though educators have used its principles for decades. Place-based education promotes learning that is rooted in a landscape’s unique history, environment, culture, and economy.

What Bruce McComisky and Cynthia Ryan did for placed-based pedagogy in urban universities, Placing the Academy attempts to do for all universities. In looking at such a broad topic, the collection questions and re-examines the definition of what a place is and how places are formed. Much like Nedra Reynolds’s work, writing about place must include both the metaphorical implications as well as the material. According to place-based educational pedagogy, students often lose their “sense of place,” or strong identification with a particular geographical area, through focusing too intensely on national or global issues. Place-based educators feel that students should first have grounding in the history, culture, and ecology of their surrounding environments before moving on to broader subjects. In this philosophy, place is more than a geographical location; it is a collection of people, stories, traditions, landscapes, knowledge, and history forming significance for the place’s inhabitants—and each place holds a special lesson. To recognize these lessons, Wendell Berry advises “Stay away from anything / that obscures the place it is in. / There are no unsacred places; / There are only sacred places / and desecrated places” (lines 18-22). Placing the Academy is immensely enjoyable in its range, providing literary glimpses into academics’ special connections to several “places” across the country and globe. The collection attempts “to make legible the land that lies within, here teachers and scholars tell stories of growing up and growing older, of moving and remaining, of working and playing, and of being placed” (5). While Sinor and Kaufman seem to have made an effort to represent many places and experiences, a Pacific slant is apparent in that fourteen of the twenty-one writers are positioned in and/or writing about the west coast.

Drawing on the work of Scott Russell Sanders, the editors construct a collection that examines the academy’s relationship to nature and the role of the community in forming a sense of place, work, and identity. This book’s purpose is to explore the subject and call attention to the need for placed-based teaching and scholarship in higher education, especially in the composition classroom, a space that the editors feel in its interdisciplinary interests lends itself to the type of observation and reflection central to this pedagogy. However, the collection also
moves beyond the area of composition and explores applications in other disciplines including biology, philosophy, and literature.

Sinor and Kaufman structure the collection in four sections: here, there, everywhere, and in-between. “Here” centers on the idea that while universities can seem to be separate metaphorical spaces, they are, in fact, located in real geographical places. With a keen sense of observation, students can have a greater appreciation for a university. For example, in “What I Learned from the Campus Plumber,” Charles Bergman, an English Renaissance scholar, suggests that academics “can learn not only at a college campus, but from a college campus” (66). In addition, Michael Sowder explains that he connects with landscapes by practicing Zen meditation in order to “learn to be at home.” Katherine Fischer explains the way her teaching philosophy was shaped like a river bank by the mighty Mississippi, a prominent feature of her Iowa town. The necessity of adjusting to unpredictable situations, such as flooding, taught her that her teaching must be moving and adaptable, not based on fixed knowledge. Each author explains how the place where they currently teach affects their teaching and writing.

Leaving the present and immediate places of teaching for the ones that linger in memory, “There” deals with imagined or left behind landscapes that affected authors strongly and shaped who they are today. Extreme landscapes and unique situations create stunning examples of the impact place can have on its inhabitants. For example, Mitsuye Yamada writes an autobiographical essay about being a young Japanese resident of the Idaho desert confined in an internment camp during WWII; she now teaches this land and history to her students, proving a place of pain can become a place of strength and solace. Charles Waugh, a teacher whose past work in Vietnam transfers to his writing classes in the U.S. today, demonstrates that the “far away becomes understood when one attends to the near” (19). Each of these essays emphasizes that “who we are as writers and teachers may be most shaped by places we have already passed through” (19).

In “Everywhere,” the collection’s most abstract essays move from looking at literal places to a focus on meta-places and question if we can ever really “be” anywhere. Lee Torda also examines the transient and insecure nature of place in the academic profession, specifically in the quest for tenure. Also in this section, Jeffrey Buchanan writes that places are different than spaces. Quoting Kevin Hetherington, he says that a “place is an effect of a labor of division . . . of bringing in and keeping out. Places are relational; they make knowable a space in relation to any other” (269). Indigenous teacher and writer Deborah A. Miranda sees all American land as stolen ground. She complicates the idea of “placedness” by adding that a felt connection to land escapes articulation through words.

Finally those caught “In Between” speak. The final section looks at the sensation of being no place, caught between a connection to the academic and “real” worlds, never completely at home in either. These essays often examine the perspective that can come with distance, both in space and time, from a known place. By examining the role of place in the academy, the writers search for identity, probing topics such as life in the borderlands, traveling, and teaching working-class students in urban areas.

*Placing the Academy* offers great insight into the philosophy of place-based education, but it is not a handbook or practical guide to instituting place-based pedagogy.
in the classroom. The narrative structure of these essays makes the collection compelling theoretically for the reader interested in incorporating place into their teaching, but there is no handy material for the classroom teacher interested in applying the philosophy’s concepts. While it may frustrate those looking for practical applications, the book’s learn-by-example approach is fitting, since placed-based pedagogy is unique to the individual and location. The specific assignments used by a forty-year teaching veteran in rural North Dakota might not work for a first-year teacher in downtown Atlanta, but general exercises and heuristics which examine a student’s relationship with current, past, and imagined places transcend geographic specificity. The general advice which carries through the collection is be adaptable, teach in a way which expresses the identities of you and your students, pay attention to both the physical and the intellectual world around you, and learn from the past. This book acts as a first step in the process of conservation, identifying the carelessness with which we pass by natural places and calling on readers to pay attention, which might eventually lead to increased concern and social action. (An interesting book to read in comparison with Placing the Academy is Composition and Sustainability. Derek Owens uses his classroom as a model for a pedagogy which allows students to explore their place, work, and future through inquiry and writing. Through these writing assignments, he creates a long-range view of students’ impacts on environment and society.

Due to its sweeping scope and diverse contributors, Placing the Academy can wander from its focus at times and can seem like it is trying to be everything to everyone. However, Sinor and Kaufman do a great job of bookending the collection with suitably broad theoretical introductions and conclusions. The book’s scope allows for a wide potential audience, including university professors in many disciplines, but especially writing professors and those interested in environmental studies and sustainability; place and community-based education; and American studies. Essays from the book could be great resources in a composition classroom. In addition, little knowledge of the subject is needed to understand the text, so readers beyond the academic setting might find the book interesting and enjoyable. This collection is a bit like a hike in the woods: sometimes a path will loop back and sometimes a trail leads to a scenic overlook or dead end. It is not necessarily where you end up that matters, but it is the small things you notice along the way that make the hike worth taking.

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WORKS CITED


Reviewed by Jacqueline Bacon

In the foreword to Elaine B. Richardson and Ronald L. Jackson’s collection African American Rhetoric(s): Interdisciplinary Perspectives, Jacqueline Jones Royster articulates the book’s central concerns in the form of a question: “What parameters can we use to begin a more thoughtful and useful consideration of African Americans in rhetorical space?” (ix). In subsequent chapters, different approaches to this query as well as varied answers emerge. Parameters of inquiry may involve the theoretical tools we use for analyzing African American rhetoric and/or the ways we teach and evaluate student writing. What constitutes usefulness depends upon a scholar’s disciplinary or pedagogical needs. Rhetorical space is a shifting terrain, encompassing the classroom, the platform, the pulpit, and cyberspace. Through insightful textual and pedagogical studies grounded in various theoretical and historical approaches, African American Rhetoric(s) challenges scholars to empower students and other rhetors by, in Richardson’s terms, “writing new stories of African American literacy and rhetorical education” (159).

“African American rhetoric(s),” Richardson and Jackson note in their preface, refers to “the study of culturally and discursively developed knowledge-forms, communicative practices and persuasive strategies rooted in freedom struggles by people of African ancestry in America” (xiii). This critical approach allows not only for analyses of discourse but also considerations of how we can “better accommodate the development of empowering rhetoric” (xiii). Keith Gilyard’s introduction provides a comprehensive historical overview of the field, from nineteenth-century examinations of African American oratory to contemporary studies.

The chapters in part one, “Historicizing and Analyzing African American Rhetoric(s),” feature various approaches to the study of African American discourse, past and present. Logan focuses in chapter 1 on the “racialized and gendered presuppositions” that shaped reactions to the rhetoric of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and her responses. In chapters 2 and 3, Kali Tal and Gwendolyn D. Pough examine the rhetoric of the Black Panther Party. Tal focuses on the contemporary images that have replaced the Panthers’ original rhetoric, and Pough features the factors that caused the Party’s rhetoric to fail to “move the people toward revolution” (61). In chapter 4, Jacqueline Bryant analyzes instances of Afrocentric rhetoric in Harriet Jacobs’s Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Kimmika L. H. Williams explores in chapter 5 the influence of Zora Neale Hurston and Geneva Smitherman on the study of African American rhetoric as well as African American Vernacular English (AAVE).

Part two, “Visions for Pedagogy of African American rhetoric,” takes up issues related to teaching composition and rhetoric. Clinton Crawford, in chapter
argues for the origins of rhetoric in Africa, particularly Kemet (ancient Egypt), Nubia, and Ethiopia. In chapters 7 and 8, Lena Ampadu and Elaine Richardson offer studies from their own classrooms. Ampadu describes engaging her students in “imitation of African American texts as linguistic models,” helping them to replicate “oral practices in writing” (136). Richardson discusses “the academic personas acquired by two African American students,” one of whom followed “the path of the vernacular” (163) while the other tried to remove “her AAVE voice” from her writing (166). In chapter 9, Victoria Cliett examines signifying in the work of Frederick Douglass and David Walker.

In part three, “Visions for Research in African American Rhetoric(s),” five scholars consider models and concerns that can direct new research and determine the future of the field. Adam J. Banks argues in chapter ten that technology must be engaged as “one of the major battlegrounds for African American struggle” (190), since “communication technologies” always influence and shape “rhetorical production” (194). In chapter 11, Kermit Campbell makes the case for the influence of the Amistad Africans on American oratorical culture. In chapter 12, Vorris Nunley theorizes “hush harbor rhetoric,” discourse arising from spaces in which “Black folks affirm, share, and negotiate African American epistemologies and resist and subvert hegemonic Whiteness” (222). Joyce Irene Middleton examines in chapter 13 how Toni Morrison’s work on language and culture can help us understand the implications of writing in a racialized society and create empowering pedagogies. In the final chapter, William W. Cook argues that because African American rhetoric allows for resistance to dominant forms and paradigms, it can, ultimately, “readjust and redefine the norms of language making” (268) that often silence and oppress.

Although the anthology offers a range of diverse, innovative studies, certain themes resonate throughout the collection and illustrate central concerns. Various scholars note the complex relationship of African American rhetorics to both African linguistic concepts and cosmologies and to authoritarian discourses. Since, as Cliett indicates, the “culture of Black struggle is not in agreement with the ideologies of Standard English,” our goal should be not merely to create competence with conventional discourses but to encourage language uses that “communicate ideas effectively” and “revise unjust texts of the world” (182). In some cases, strategies depend upon African retentions. Understanding the African concept of nommo, or the generative power of the word, for example, can yield productive analyses of the rhetoric of historical figures such as Harriet Jacobs and Maria W. Stewart (as in Bryant’s and Ampadu’s chapters, respectively) or contemporary rhetorics such as preaching. Crawford argues that a return to the values of ancient African cultures—such as “speaking and doing right” and fostering “human harmony with nature and cosmos”—allows us to appreciate the “creative genius and rhetoric” of people of African descent throughout history as well as to remedy the “disintegration of our educational system” (132-34).
African American rhetoric also revises and transforms conventional linguistic models; it is, in Cook’s works, “in both a resistant and symbiotic relationship to the dominant discourses with which it is engaged” (259). Signifying is perhaps the most striking example, and its historical importance has implications for contemporary pedagogy. As Cliett argues, the “metacritique on the shaping of discourses and cultures” (186) that emerges within signifying is instructive for contemporary teachers of composition. Nunley’s “hush harbor rhetorics” also make visible the ways that certain notions—such as “civility, consensus, tolerance”—are in fact constructions that empower some and oppress; challenging these norms can create empowering, “transgressive classroom spaces” (238).

That teachers of writing need to be open to what Richardson calls the “alternative literacies” and “counterlanguage” (156-57) that arise from the experiences and traditions of students of color is illustrated throughout the book. AAVE, in particular, is a dynamic language that is, in Williams’s terms, “African-centered” and able to express “the breath and depth of African American experience” as “un-adulterated English” cannot (101). Like other discourses of people of color, AAVE has been devalued, but this perspective not only misses the eloquent, persuasive appeals and knowledge-making strategies that are found in AAVE but also can devastate students whose authentic voices are silenced or denigrated. Richardson’s chapter relates, for example, that the student who used vernacular linguistic strategies found his work was devalued by instructors although it was based on a “way of knowing” that was “sustaining” for him (166), while the student who suppressed her AAVE was rewarded with a higher grade even though her writing was neither original nor particularly expressive.

The discrepancy Richardson highlights illustrates another key theme of the anthology: control of one’s rhetoric is the key to agency and freedom. Various examples in the book suggest the potential empowerment that results from management of one’s discourse and the damage that can result when others have control. Banks notes that technology can be empowering for people of color, from Dr. King’s “grasp of how television worked as a rhetorical tool” (198), to Hip Hop, to the ways one can take “more direct control of one’s message” in cyberspace (195). It can also further oppress, if closing the so-called Digital Divide is considered an end in itself rather than providing “meaningful access” and communicative control to technology for people of color (201). And even tools that start out in the hands of people of color may be taken over by others. Tal maintains that the critical, politically astute rhetoric of the Black Panthers has been transformed into “White-constructed, Black-reconstructed popular culture iconography” that ironically “[promotes] the very capitalist structures the Panthers sought to destroy” (56).

African American Rhetoric(s) clearly establishes the dynamic nature of African American discourse and its ongoing relevance and resonance for all students and scholars of rhetoric. Logan demonstrates that audiences do not just “respond” to speakers such as Frances Harper; “Black women rhetors” take agency and draw on “a range of rhetorical practices to teach their audiences” (35). AAVE, Williams
and Richardson emphasize, encourages creativity and the development of a rhetor’s unique voice. Crawford, Ampadu, and Nunley show how texts ranging from the ancient Egyptian Instructions of Ptahhotep to Henry Highland Garnet 1848 “Address to the Slaves in the United States of America” to popular musical lyrics can and do invigorate rhetoric and writing classrooms. This generative energy produces new forms and methods continually, reminding us that, as Cook affirms, “The end is not in sight. . . [T]here is no end” (270).

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**ANNOUNCEMENTS**

**Call for Submissions:** *Young Scholars in Writing: Undergraduate Research in Writing and Rhetoric* seeks theory-driven and/or research-based submissions from undergraduates on the following topics: writing, rhetoric, composition, professional writing, technical writing, business writing, discourse analysis, writing technologies, peer tutoring in writing, writing process, writing in the disciplines, and related topics. Submissions to this refereed journal should be 10-25 pages, in MLA format, and should be accompanied by a professor’s note that the essay was written by the student. Please send four copies of manuscript without author’s name on manuscript. Please include author’s name, address, affiliation, email address, and phone number on separate title page. Send inquiries and submissions to Dr. Laurie Grobman, Editor, Penn State Berks-Lehigh Valley College, P.O. Box 7009, Tulehocken Road, Reading, PA 19610-6009. E-mail inquiries to leg8@psu.edu. Submissions are accepted all year.
Call for Papers, Edited Collection

Reclaiming the Rural: Essays on Literacy, Rhetoric, and Pedagogy

Editors: Kim Donehower, University of North Dakota; Charlotte Hogg, Texas Christian University; Eileen E. Schell, Syracuse University

The co-authors of Rural Literacies (SIUP 2007) invite submissions from researchers in composition, literacy, and rhetorical studies for an edited collection investigating new ways to understand and interpret literacy, rhetoric, and pedagogy in rural contexts. This volume seeks essays that move beyond the typical arguments for preserving, abandoning, or modernizing rural communities. It seeks explorations of the rural that address the complexities of rural life and the interconnections among rural, urban, and suburban communities, and among the local, global, and transnational.

We are seeking previously unpublished essays describing ongoing or completed research projects on rural literacy, rhetoric, and pedagogy (widely defined). These include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Rhetorical investigations of political movements, associations, and practices that affect rural life;
- Historical analyses of rural literacies and rhetorics;
- Studies examining rural literacies and rhetorics in the context of rural economies impacted by globalization and other economic policies;
- Research that explores the realities of rural literacies and rhetorics against pervasive stereotypes that overlook race, class, gender, sexual orientation, place, or religion;
- Analyses of the ways technologies impact rural literacies, rhetorics, and pedagogies and vice versa;
- Rhetorical studies of representations of rural literacies and rhetorics within academic scholarship, the media, or popular culture;
- Classroom-based research involving rural students or rural issues;
- Ethnographic and other qualitative research on rural literacies and/or rural rhetorics;
- Analyses of educational practices, policies, and pedagogies that affect rural students;
- Arguments for new methodologies for researching and interpreting rural literacies and rhetorics.

Please submit a CV, an abstract of no more than 500 words, and complete contact information to Charlotte Hogg, c.hogg@tcu.edu by January 15, 2008. Feel free to contact the editors with any questions you may have about the project.

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