“I Can’t Do Cartwheels, So I Write”: Students’ Writing Affect

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This article uses an ethnographic case study of high school writers preparing for college to explore students’ writing experiences in and outside of school. In each domain, students experience affects related to embodiment, relationships, and movement, but the study reveals qualitative differences in those affective experiences. These differences seem to underlie students’ overall orientation toward personal, out-of-school writing and away from in-school writing. Interpreting students’ orientations as affective responses or consequences, the author offers suggestions for writing pedagogies that might arouse the embodied, relational, and movement affects students prefer within the domain of academic writing. The article thus positions the study of affect as integral to composition theory, research, and teaching.

Within Composition as a post-1960 discipline, intimations of bodily affect appear as early as Sondra Perl’s 1980 work on composing processes. Borrowing a term from philosopher Eugene Gendlin, Perl labels hesitations in students’ writing processes as “felt sense,” which she applies to writing in this way: “The move is not to any words on the page nor to the topic but to feelings or non-verbalized perceptions that surround the words, or to what the words already present evoke in the writer. The move draws on sense experience . . . . The move occurs inside the writer, to what is physically felt” (364-365, italics in original). Perl’s use of felt sense bears striking similarities to contemporary affect theory, which grounds subjective experience in embodied sensory perceptions that may precede or exceed conscious recognition. In the nearly forty years since Perl, it has become almost commonplace to theorize writing as an affective relationship between writers and writing environments, which scholars describe metaphorically as ecologies, networks, matrices, and rhizomes. Marilyn Cooper’s assertion that writing is not “the product of minds somehow separated from bodies” points to the importance of a writing body’s affective experience and, indirectly, to affect’s breadth—its ability to incorporate both mind and body (18).

Despite the field’s apparent comfort with affect theory, the use of affect in research and practice “remains very much in progress” (Micciche, “Material” 489). There is more to learn about how students affectively experience writing. This article contributes to that work by using an affective lens to explore students’ composing experiences in and outside of school. I conducted this
IRB-approved research in an elective, writing-intensive workshop designed to prepare high school students—particularly students who are underrepresented in higher education—for success in college writing. These questions guided my research:

- How do students affectively experience writing in academic settings, including a literacy program designed to help them develop academic writing skills?
- How do students affectively experience writing outside of school?

The findings reveal affective dimensions of students’ self-chosen and academic writing practices, particularly their affective orientations toward personal writing and away from academic writing. Importantly, these orientations appear to be rooted in experiential differences that exceed common emotional labels—“like” or “hate,” for example. Rather, those labels seem to function as shorthand for affects related to embodiment, relationships, and movement.

Because students often use the language of emotion to describe their writing experiences, some researchers accept affect as reducible to emotion. For example, Joanne Addison and Sharon McGee describe the “truly affective” component of their research: asking high school and college students to identify their “feelings” about writing by selecting from options that include “enjoy,” “look forward to,” and “like” (166, 168). The authors correctly assert the importance of understanding students’ emotional responses to writing. “After all,” they say, “if people just do not like to write, [writing teachers] have an entirely different battle to wage” (166). However, to say a student likes or dislikes writing or that students find some writing pleasurable and other writing painful fails to fully account for their affective experiences.

Drawing on interviews and student-authored freewrite journals, I offer a more complete affective understanding of what students mean when they say that they like (and hate) certain kinds of writing. In interviews, I asked students to describe all the writing they do—where they write, what their bodies and minds do while writing, and what sensations and stimulations they experience. Understanding students’ writing affect in this more expansive way—beyond just emotions and feelings—is vital because, as Julie Nelson argues, “repeated experience with similar affects grow together to create an underlying disposition and, in turn, our own affective capacities” (par. 12). Through repeated experiences, affects stick to bodies. Thus, the negative affects that students in my study associate with academic writing present a challenge for teachers of the college composition classes they may enter. Importantly, however, some scholars argue that affect can also be unstuck or, as Jenny Edbauer Rice says, be “disarticulate[d]” and “rearticulate[d]” (210). This quality of affect—its ability to be both tenacious and loose—points to affect’s pedagogical potential. After
laying a theoretical foundation for my research and explaining my methodology, I explore the affective differences students describe in personal and academic writing and suggest how understanding affect can transform pedagogy in ways that draw students toward academic writing.

**Theorizing Affective Bodies, Relationships, and Movement**

In its broadest sense, affect concerns bodies and how they perceive, respond to, resonate with, interpret, and evaluate the forces and objects they encounter. Though intrinsic to Rhetoric and Composition, the body’s status as an object of scholarly and pedagogical interest in both fields has waxed and waned. Affect theory insists that it be a focal point.

Affect privileges a body that is not self-contained and independent, but unavoidably entangled in an assemblage of forces, energies, practices, objects, and other bodies. While Perl described “sense experience” that occurs “inside the writer,” affect scholars today focus on affect as a phenomenon that emerges between bodies and material and immaterial objects, ranging from the obvious (pens, paper, keyboards, desks, teachers, assignments, and readers) to the unexpected (animals, feelings, and locations). These, Laura Micciche notes, are not mere accompaniments to writing but rather “partnerships that constitute the very condition of writing itself” (“Material” 499). The objects writers respond to include anything that has the capacity to affect writers, even “objects in the sense of values, practice… as well as aspirations” (Ahmed 41). Thus, writing itself—as a practice, a value, and an aspiration—forms part of the assemblage in which a writer is embodied.

This emphasis on writing as interactions links embodiment to a concern for relationships. Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg locate affect in “intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds” (1). Affect is “how we are touched by what we are near” (Ahmed 30). Affective connections include those between a writer and reader, a writer and a text, and a writer and writing itself, as Victor Vitanza elaborates: “What writing or composition wants is a writer! To invite someone to become a writer! . . . A body filled with tics that cannot but (not) write! Twitchings.” Notice that writing invites and wants, and writers respond through ineluctable tics and twitchings. Vitanza’s complication of agency underscores again that writing is not an autonomous cognitive act. Writing’s wild, insatiable desiring that provokes voluntary and involuntary affective responses in the writer.

A third affective concern, movement, affirms the body as always in motion within an assemblage of swirling elements. Incompatible with stasis, affect is not interested in what a thing is, but in its “becomings”—its potential for change and for new ways of being (Deleuze xxx). Becomings unfold within
and across relationships through intentional and haphazard movements. “The drama of contingency” characterizes affective movement, suggesting that everything is both possible and provisional (Ahmed 30). At the same time, affect moves bodies in ways that are not purely random. Sara Ahmed clarifies: “To be affected by something is to evaluate that thing. Evaluations are expressed in how bodies turn toward things…Those things we do not like we move away from” (31-2). The evaluation of an object as good or bad relates to immediate affective responses and also to the future happiness (or unhappiness) that we assume will result from our proximity to that object. Thus affect includes at least three kinds of movement: sensations of motion, processes of changing or becoming, and orientations toward and away from other bodies and objects. Together, concerns of embodiment, relationships, and movement provide some definitional integrity for my research; however, they are not the discrete categories my language may imply. Rather, the data shows considerable interplay and overlap between and across these concerns.

Researching Affect

Its emergent and fluid nature makes affect an unwieldy research topic, yet my study shows how ethnographic methods can be used to trace and describe affect. My research site is a collaboration between a public school district and a university College of Education.² The annual summer workshop is designed for secondary students, some identified as “struggling” writers because they have failed a language arts class, scored below proficient on standardized tests, or been identified by a teacher as potentially benefitting from additional instruction. Pedagogically, the workshop uses a self-regulated strategy development model (Graham et al.) intended to provide students explicit instruction about writing skills and strategies, help them develop positive attitudes about and confidence in their own writing abilities, and teach them methods for monitoring and regulating their own writing development. During the two-week workshop, students write an argument essay and daily freewrite journal entries. This article draws from my analysis of the freewrite journals and interviews in which I asked students about all writing they do, not just their writing in the workshop. I spent three summers in the workshop. During the first two years, I observed the workshop and worked with a few students on their essays. I also obtained IRB approval to analyze anonymized texts students produced in the workshop (diagnostic essays and freewrite journals). During the third year, I undertook an IRB-approved research project to compile fieldnotes and interview that year’s participants.³ The research methods and questions about writing affect I used in the final year emerged from my participation during the first two years and my analysis of the journals, as I describe below. When I interviewed students during the last three days of the
2016 workshop, I asked them about their writing experiences and affect generally, as I had not yet anticipated the themes of embodiment, relationships, and movement that emerged as I coded the data (Appendix A).4

Because my interest is students’ composing experiences, I do not say much about the quality of the texts (journals and essays) they write in the workshop. Faculty and peers give students abundant feedback on drafts of their essays, but no one grades the final copy; students receive academic credit just for attending the workshop and completing the essay. The freewrite journals are designed to help students develop “fluency,” which faculty believe will help them on computer-assessed essays where length is a predictor of score. Students write in the journals for a timed period each day, trying to increase the amount of text (measured in number of written lines) they produce. Workshop faculty do not record number of lines written and do not read the journals. Because students composed the journals as part of the regular curriculum and not for my research and because I did not ask for journals until the workshop’s end, the students who contributed their anonymized journals wrote with no anticipation that their journals would be assessed or analyzed.

As I have shared my research, some have objected that students’ texts (especially the freewrite journals and other out-of-school writing they describe) would likely be “a mess” by conventional assessments. That may be true, but at the same time textual quality does not reveal much about the writer’s affective experience. In fact, from an affective standpoint, the quality of students’ texts might matter only if evaluations of those texts become part of the affective ecology—a C grade on a paper may provoke different affects than an A grade, for example. For workshop students, evaluations of their final essays and their personal writing are mostly self-appraisals (students’ own sense of the text’s effectiveness or an audience’s probable response). Thus in the context of the workshop, the affective impact of assessment is more muted than it might be in traditional academic settings.

Using a grounded theory approach, I first read the freewrite journals, interview transcripts, and fieldnotes holistically to identify salient patterns, themes, and issues related to affect. I applied preliminary codes to chunks of discourse, for example, describes the body or a bodily sensation. Those preliminary themes guided additional rounds of coding, in which I created more detailed and refined codes and concepts, for example, uses positive language to describe embodiment. Axial coding (Corbin and Strauss) allowed me to put the data back together as I noticed connections and relationships between codes regarding affective responses, writing domains, and writing tasks, and as I gathered these around what emerged as core phenomena: relationships, embodiment, and movement. I coded freewrite journals from twenty students (40% of 2015 population) and interviews with thirty-one students (75% of 2016 population).
Tracing Affect across Data Sets and Writing Domains

The following discussion of the two data sets (journals and interviews) illustrates both how my research evolved and how that evolution led me to trace students’ affect across writing domains (in- and out-of-school). Again, the journals were a daily exercise in “keep[ing] your hand moving.” Students knew they could write about anything they chose, but faculty provided prompts as a source of invention. The prompts served both expressivist and self-regulating functions related to the curriculum’s goals:

- Who am I as a writer?
- What do I like or dislike about writing?
- What do I need to do to get better at writing?

When they write about themselves as writers, students primarily describe experiences with writing outside the workshop. In fact, of the sixteen journal writers who claim to “like” or “love” writing, fifteen describe enjoying writing tasks and writing topics that seemed unlikely to be required in school. For example, students say they enjoy writing to “get my expressions out,” “to vent,” to “say my problems,” to record “my crazy hectic complicated life,” to express “whatever comes to my mind, sometimes about my feelings or my day,” and to describe “people who are more fucked up than I am.”

Furthermore, students seem to enjoy non-academic genres most, those written outside of school. Only two students (10%) who “like” or “love” writing mention writing in academic genres such as argument papers, persuasive essays, and reports. It is not surprising that these students enjoy self-directed writing but dislike required writing. Addison and McGee report a similar finding, with nearly half of high school students in their study claiming to enjoy personal rather than academic writing. The higher percentage (75%) of happy journal writers in my study perhaps reflects the context: an elective summer writing program. Students who attend may be more interested in and committed to writing than a general high school population. On the other hand, my study included a lower percentage of writers who claimed to enjoy all writing tasks (10% compared to Addison and McGee’s 28%). Importantly, in my study, students’ out-of-school writing often resembled what might happen in classrooms that use expressivist pedagogies to encourage “self-sponsored, imaginative, contemplative, and exploratory” writing (Harris 79). Proponents of these pedagogies have long contended that students find such writing therapeutic, satisfying, and joyful, and my data supports that position.

An important moment in the research process occurred early in my reading of the journals when I encountered this response to the prompt asking about writing “like” and “dislike”:
I like fictional writing. It is, to me, the immense joy of creating entire worlds derived from a single mind, a single entity. You exist as if you were a god from the tales of theology in your own universe. Nonfiction, however, presents itself as a hassle. Your limiters exist in the concepts of logic and facts, and you exist as a dot, trapped in a swarm.

The evocative metaphors, the stark contrast between fiction's virtual possibility and nonfiction's confinement, the acknowledgment of writing's affective power over and on a writer, and the tremendous agency afforded nonfiction writing—resulting in the writer's embodiment as a “dot”—all captivated me. I returned to this passage again and again. Clearly, this student understood writing genres and writing domains as distinct affective experiences, but what about other students? How did their affective writing experiences vary across domains? What role did affect play in their writing enjoyment? Armed with these questions, I returned to the workshop in 2016. I asked this new group of students to describe their experiences with writing inside and outside of school: “Think about the writing you do [inside school/outside of school] and try to describe what that feels like for you—maybe describe where you are when you write and your feelings or thoughts or how your body feels.”

Perhaps the most surprising finding in interviews was how much writing these “struggling” writers do outside of school. Of the thirty-one students I interviewed, 77% write regularly outside of school, and another 16% report writing at least occasionally. The occasional writers include three students who initially answered “no” or “not really” when asked if they write outside of school. In follow-up questions, I asked about texting and social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. These students then acknowledged their SMS and social media use but seemed surprised that I considered these forms of writing. Only two students (7%) claimed to only write in school. This means that despite having abundant non-writing recreational options, 93% of students choose to spend at least part of their leisure time writing. This impressive number suggests that personal writing “affects [them] in a good way” (Ahmed 38). One said it makes her “feel free,” another that it “lifts weights off my shoulders.” Overwhelmingly for students in my study, to use the words of one, personal writing is “more of a want than a need.”

Equally impressive, the interviews show that outside of school, students write in a variety of genres, across multiple media, and for different purposes. Students compose in many creative genres—poems, plays, stories, fan fiction, novels, and character sketches—as well as transactional genres—takeout orders, applications, instructions, letters, and email. Overall, these genres represent writing that fulfills practical, therapeutic, and recreational purposes and that
helps these young writers feel competent in outside-of-school domains. Altogether, it is an impressive list that speaks to the generic range, literacy, and rhetorical ability of students who have been identified as “struggling” writers.

Importantly, students’ out-of-school writing falls primarily in “creative” genres while their in-school writing is done in genres typically thought of as academic—argument, expository, and literary analysis papers. In 2008, researchers at the University of Washington identified school as the dominant domain for fiction, poetry, freewriting, and even journaling (Rounsaville et al.). Perhaps due to the adoption of Common Core standards, this is not the case for the students in my study. One student says of her high school curriculum, “All we do in high school is argumentative for four years, and it really kills the students’ love of writing to just do essays. I feel like if there were opportunities to work on poetry, stories, creative anything, it would make writing so much easier for students who struggle with it.” But another student expresses “serious doubts” that poetry would ever be rewarded in school. School, he says, is full of “negative energy and pressure to advance, because you won’t make it in the world if you don’t make it in school. There is not that pressure with leisure things like poetry.” So creative writing gets a back-handed compliment: students prefer it, but it is not something that is going to help anyone “make it in the world.”

In dismissing creative writing’s value, this student tacitly accepts academic writing’s status as a social good—something widely accepted as promising well-being, contentment, and happiness. If you can write well, then good things (academic success, college degree, rewarding employment, prosperity) will follow (Ahmed 41, adapted). Thus, students who turn to academic writing because it affects them in a good way are in harmony with a community that “shares an orientation toward [writing] as being good” (Ahmed 38). But most of the students I interviewed are not affected by academic writing in a good way; it is not the writing they turn toward. To understand why this is so, I trace students’ affect across the two writing domains: personal and in-school (especially their regular secondary classrooms). In both domains, students experience affects that map onto the theory described above. In fact, relationships, embodiment, and movement seem key to understanding students’ orientations. Again, for ease of discussion, I attempt to separate these concerns, though they overlap. Even so, I hardly capture the complex and messy interplay between affective elements.

**Personal Writing**

Perhaps most prominently, students describe their personal writing as deeply relational. Students repeatedly use the word *out* in their descriptions of personal writing. Fifty-five percent of students see personal writing as a way to move emotions, ideas, thoughts, concerns, and problems outside of them-
selves. Referencing both embodiment and movement, the spatial orientation of “out” appears to be not about discarding emotions, etc., but rather about separating them from the writer in order to allow a new perspective on, stance toward, or aesthetic response to them.

For example, one student says, “It’s really nice to take something that’s bothering me [and] create it into like, make it, mold it into something that I think is beautiful and release it in a way that takes something very ugly and makes something beautiful. . . . It’s really nice to get it out there and to make it something better than frustration or anger.” Out also affords writers a different relationship to past and future selves. One student says, “I like leaving something for myself to find…And then my writing as well, they [previously written texts] showed me how far I’ve come, how far I’ve changed, and it makes me a stronger person.” Students also write things out to work through challenges in interpersonal relationships or to compensate for lack of relationships. As one student says, “I have a whole bunch of ideas just like in my head and like I don’t have anyone to talk to about it . . . so it’s kind of good here [in a journal] to write them.”

The students’ “out” language may seem to index a Cartesian duality that is at odds with the idea of an affective ecology. Karen Barad’s notion of agential realism provides a framework more coherent with my affective lens. In Barad’s conceptualization, “out” can be read as referencing temporary boundaries generated by the body’s participation in intra-active writing phenomena. Rather than describing the body itself, “out” functions as, in Barad’s terms, a “cut” that momentarily marks and divides objects and bodies, opening new opportunities for knowing and being.

This kind of “out” differs, of course, from the externalization that Charles Bazerman and Howard Tinberg posit as one of writing studies’ “threshold concepts.” For them, externalization creates a text that can “be examined, revised, or otherwise worked on by the writer, collaborators, or other people” (61). Externalization and connection are linked, in this view, to textual improvement. In contrast, students in my study externalize and connect for reasons that are less, or at least differently, instrumental. As described above, students write for insight, self-awareness, conflict resolution, catharsis, therapy, and relationship maintenance or repair. Connection, rather than textual perfection, appears to be the primary motivation for writing things “out.” In fact, one student suggests the value of personal writing’s textual flaws. “It’s not like I have to write to please someone,” she says, “it’s just kind of what I want to put out there.” Free from evaluative concerns, her writing “just kind of flows.”

Second, students represent personal writing as pleasurable embodiment. Many students described their writing spaces—often bedrooms—in sensory detail: “When I’m in my room alone, I set a candle. I have like water or tea,
a little bit of, like, calm violin music—like classical music—on. I’m in my pajamas.” Others describe feeling sensations of release, calm, or cool breezes, hearing the sound of water running or birds chirping, experiencing a “lightning storm,” or being “enthralled” or transported to different conscious states or other worlds. Even negative bodily sensations evoke positive evaluations. For example, one student interprets an aching hand as evidence that writing can “suck you in” to the point that “you kind of forget you exist.” Another student compares the embodiment of writing to running: “I’m not an athlete at all really. But if I could imagine what I think some sprinters feel like, I think it’d be similar to that, because I’m sure—like my hand will cramp up, but it’s just like you’re so in the zone that it just kind of fades away.” This student’s experience resembles what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihaly terms “flow” moments, “when a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile” (3). During flow experiences, positive affects related to meaning, purpose, and motivation overwhelm negative affects, in this case the pain of a throbbing hand. That students may enter a flow state while composing makes their descriptions of personal writing as “just kind of flow[ing]” even more apt.

My third concern—movement—intersects with writing’s relational and embodied qualities. Again, these three concerns work in the rhizomatic fashion affect theory suggests; rather than separate and independent elements, they act as nodes in a shared affective structure. For example, movement is essential to the “out” that anchors students’ relational affect since “out” moves emotions, thoughts, and ideas through networks of paper, screens, and bodies. Even when the circulation of the writer’s thoughts does not include other human bodies, the movement to paper or screen seems affectively important. For example, one student writes a lengthy and articulate letter to her dad and his partner in her freewrite journal. Chafing under their rules for internet and phone use, this student apologizes while skillfully defending her disobedient behavior. Yet early in the next day’s entry she writes that she did not share her thoughts with them, and she does not mention their rules again. The movement to the page alone appears to assuage her affective need.

Students similarly weave movement into their descriptions of embodied sensation, as in the above description of running. One student likens writing to an embodied expression of joy, akin to doing cartwheels. “But,” she says, “I can’t do cartwheels, so I write it instead.” Many students experience writing as a sensation of moving through places they create in writing. Such movement seems to be a key element of personal writing for the student (quoted above) who described writing fiction as the sensation of “exist[ing] as if you were a god,” since the student contrasts that with the sensation of being “limit[ed]” and “trapped” while writing nonfiction. For other writers, writing movement
is literal as they act or speak things out in the process of composing. In summary, relationships, embodiment, and movement appear to be key affective components that compel students’ outside-of-school writing.

In-school Writing

In school, where their writing consists primarily of argument and literary analysis essays, students have a different affective experience. Most identify a purpose for this kind of writing: the opportunity to get their voice, opinion, or ideas “out.” One student says, “It’s letting out what you learned.” Again gesturing to both embodiment and movement, this spatial conception mirrors students’ personal writing, but it is important to note that when this student talks about his academic writing going out, he does not envision it forming relationships with other objects in a writing assemblage—the move out does not forge new connections to other bodies, objects, or forces. “Out,” in this case, appears to be merely a mental exercise in which knowledge is transferred from the brain onto the paper without transforming either the writer or the knowledge. Both remain static.

Another student says, “It feels empowering because you’re finally getting it out there and you’re showing that you have an opinion and so you feel strong. You like have a connection to it, and so it just feels really good to have it out there.” While emphasizing the empowerment associated with getting something “out,” this writer mostly reaffirms her original connection to her opinion. She does not indicate what—if anything—her opinion might do “out there” or what other objects or audiences might be affected by her “show.” Another student says that academic writing is “to get your opinion out so that you can be heard.” Here the passive construction of the dependent clause raises questions about the relational force of her writing. Across interviews, this pattern was typical—most students describe academic writing as an important means of “put[ting] my voice out in the world” but do not seem to imagine their writing as part of a relational network. When, rarely, students mention an audience, they use vague descriptors—“the world,” “someone,” “people”—that belie authentic relational intentions or results. However, one student points to the relational potential of her academic writing by comparing it to a story. She says:

The whole point of writing is to take someone somewhere, to make them see things from your perspective. . . . You can’t immerse someone in a story if you can’t make what you’re writing feel real or important, and so being able—even in informative essays—it’s everything to be able to explain what you’re seeing in your story so they can see it too.
Significantly, this writer demonstrates academic writing’s affective capacity by highlighting its similarity to the out-of-school writing she prefers, namely the embodiment (“seeing”) and movement (“take someone somewhere”) of stories.

Still, most students express limited relational value “out there” for their academic writing. More troubling is that academic writing may disrupt a writer’s intrapersonal affect. The workshop lets students choose the topics they will write on, and many students express appreciation for that agency. But in answer to questions about in-school writing in general, students describe academic writing and affect as incompatible. One student seemed surprised when I asked her to describe how in-school writing feels: “Um, I don’t, I don’t really feel anything . . .” Another student characterizes academic writing this way: “You detach yourself from the essay.” And the student who described academic writing as “pretty much you are just letting out what you learned” followed that statement with a definitive “It’s not like feelings.” One student suggests that this need not be the case for academic writing. The problem, she believes, is not the academic genre, but the lack of choice:

When it comes to school, it’s like, um, it’s assigned by the teacher . . . and it’s not the same feeling as doing a paper on something you know you like or you want . . . even though I still can get it done. But it’s not the same, like, it can be the same effort, but it doesn’t come out the same, kind of, what would you call it, like, good I guess. Like it doesn’t come out the same way. Like you can tell the feeling of a paper than the other one.

For these students, then, academic writing can index a double relational void. Severed from a personal connection to the text, students see their writing moving “out” but not necessarily toward other objects. It is textualization without relational purpose or affect.

Students’ experiences of embodiment with academic writing are likewise discouraging. Students use words like forced, rushed, livid, focused, bound, and pressured to describe the experience of writing in school. The students’ diction emphasizes both the energy that in-school writing exerts on students and their evaluation of that energy. Thirty-nine percent of students describe academic writing in terms of necessity, but only four mention being compelled by the teacher, the assignment, the grade, or the due date. One student describes forcing himself to write. More commonly, students assign agency vaguely to the writing itself, its structure, or the work it demands: “When I’m writing essays, I’m more focused because I have to be.” Many students, echoing
Vitanza, acknowledge academic writing’s capacity to affect them, but mostly in negative ways.

For example, a student who experiences a sensation of flying while writing poetry describes academic writing this way: “Not like against a wall, but like I’m climbing a wall. I’m bound by force, but I’m scaling it to a destination. If I keep climbing I will eventually finish.” In his descriptions of both writing domains, we see the interplay of embodiment and movement, but the language here suggests the imperative force academic writing inscribes on his body and some uncertainty about the point of it all. The student does not clarify what the “destination” is or why one would want to “finish” climbing the wall. Thus, the problem of in-school embodiment may be less the pain and exertion writing requires and more the absence of purpose or reward.

After all, even unpleasurable affects can spark writing. Micciche (“Trouble”) describes the generative potential of troubling affects such as agitation, disturbance, interference, interruption, and exertion. In fact, much of the self-chosen writing students describe as affectively pleasurable originates in unpleasant affects. It is often emotional trauma, family stress, and personal crises that provoke students to write and not just in creative or expressivist genres. The one student in my study who wrote an essay outside of school did so in response to classroom activities and assignments about identity and immigration that disturbed her and precipitated her later voluntary writing. As a Mexican-American student, she “really got into” the idea of marginalized or “in the shadows” identities. That idea produced an affect of agitation that provoked her elective essay. Furthermore, even when students negatively evaluate the exertion academic writing requires, that exertion—when linked to a meaningful purpose—can provide affective motivation, as it did for the student who enjoyed the feeling of an aching hand in out-of-school writing.

Finally, movement. Except for the movement of “out” described earlier, only the “climbing” student above and three other students associate academic writing with movement. One student laments that writing shuts down his movement because it is too “complicated” and “stressful.” Another student describes the “really repetitive and routine” movement academic essays requires: “Here’s one point, here’s a supporting quote, here’s why it works, here’s my ending to that paragraph. And then over and over again.” Only one student gestures toward the kind of curious, generative, exploratory movement we might hope to see in students’ descriptions of writing: “When I first start writing and like the idea is there and it’s just like BOOM all of these connections. It’s like a giant Venn diagram . . . like a word web, and it just all fits together. And then I actually have to, like, put it into sentences . . . That’s where it gets, like, shaky.” Here academic writing curtails inventive movement.
Another student admits she is “a lot more enthralled” with personal writing done by hand than with an argument essay written on a computer, where “I try to sit up straight and kind of like, ‘K we gotta do this.’” But later in the interview she expresses a more favorable view of using a computer for academic writing. “One nice thing about computers is that it’s still all there, but you can move it around,” she says. The computer makes writing “kind of like a puzzle,” where she can rearrange, add, and discard pieces. She concludes, “So [writing the essay] was not like [writing in her journal] where it’s on the page, it’s on the page, and it’s over. It’s a lot of revision, and I think I like the revision part of it even more than I actually like the writing part of it.” Though this student disavows academic writing in general, like other students she seems drawn to affective dimensions of movement and relationships. While not changing her overall affective orientation, the affordances of the computer that allow her to move and reorder relationships in her essay draw her to revision.

**Affective (Dis)Harmony**

This research complements and elaborates scholarship that theorizes writing as an affective phenomenon. To understand students’ writing affect, I have focused on an affective triad of relationships, embodiment, and movement, but these concerns do not exhaust the bodily responses, sensations, impulses, thoughts, and emotions associated with writing. Rather, they provide a starting point for understanding the affects writing provokes. Attention to these categories reveals the experiential differences that underlie students’ orientations toward out-of-school writing and away from in-school writing. My goal in interpreting these orientations as affective consequences is more than just a critique of academic writing. Rather, I offer some implications of the research for both pedagogy and research.

My study affirms the value of expressivist and creative writing both in and outside of school. While the idea of expressivist pedagogies is not new, my research contributes a more nuanced explanation for why expressivist writing matters. We expect students to prefer expressivist writing because it “places the writer in the center” (Burnham 19). Unlike academic tasks that ask students to research and write about subjects about which they may have little interest, expressivist writing “assign[s] highest value to [the student’s] imaginative, psychological, social, and spiritual development” (19). Additionally, students may feel less restrained by the conventions of creative writing genres than by those of academic genres. And much expressivist and creative writing includes no assessment or accountability. Though all of these factors contribute to students’ affective orientation toward expressivist and creative writing, my research shows that students also value the relational, dynamic, and embodied affects.
such writing elicits—affects they do not typically experience while fulfilling academic writing assignments.

Because students associate positive affect with expressivist and creative writing, composition instructors might seek ways to include more of this writing in the curriculum. Speaking appreciatively of the freewrite journal, one student described it as a place for creative expression before turning to the work of “serious writing.” Yet, we might also reimagine the “serious writing” we require in our classrooms, perhaps dissolving the strict boundaries between academic genres and more expressivist and creative genres, as some scholars are beginning to do in their own writing. For example, in a recent CCC article, Chris Anson “repurpose[d] the case-study genre into a reflective analysis of a completely personal experience” (544). He admits that he was only able to perform this kind of deviation because “he had earned the confidence and authority to do so” (544). We can help students earn confidence and authority in our classrooms by introducing them to work like Anson’s and encouraging generic experimentation. Finding ways to couple academic and personal writing in composition classrooms may positively shape both individual student affect toward in-school writing and the overall affective ecology of our classrooms.

A second approach to reimagining “serious writing” is to design writing tasks that arouse the affects of embodiment, relationships, and movement students prefer but still require students to follow standard academic conventions. Mary Soliday and Jennifer Trainor suggest that assignment descriptions are a key way teachers can encourage what Arlene Wilner calls “bounded openness”—creative, exploratory, and unexpected movement within academic conventions. Assignment descriptions that ask questions, hedge, avoid listing dos and do nots, and include language such as “‘consult,’ ‘imagine,’ ‘consider,’ or ‘you may probably find’” allow students to experience writing as a complex and uncertain unfolding of connections (137). Likewise, Wendy Hayden proposes the benefits of archival assignments that allow students “wiggle room” to experience novel (for an academic context) sensations of embodiment, relationships, and movement (146). The work of these scholars illustrates the possibility of creating affectively enjoyable writing experiences within traditional academic conventions. Additionally, we might consider assigning digital genres or multimodal genres that can do academic work but may feel less like “school writing” for our students. My research provides a heuristic for evaluating the affective consequences of the writing we assign.

Finally, I believe my research suggests the value of making affect visible in writing classrooms. Thinking about how bodies respond to other bodies, objects, and ideas fascinates many students. Most participants in my study answered my questions about writing affect easily, offering rich and full stories of their writing experiences. One participant described her affective experience
in detail even before I asked the question. Still, seven students struggled to articulate their affect, despite additional probing on my part. In my composition classes, I have found that most students eagerly participate in conversations about affect. They readily describe their own affective responses to movies, music, food, and other people. They can identify and articulate affective orientations toward or away from—among other things—sushi, puppies, chewing noises, or Beyoncé. These general conversations about affect provide a lens and a vocabulary that can be transferred to talking about affective responses to writing and may help students, like the seven in my study, who initially hesitate to talk about affect. I encourage my students to reflect on their writing experiences, both orally and in writing. This allows them to recognize positive and negative affects they experience while writing. Sometimes the most beneficial result of this is the realization that they do, indeed, enjoy some kinds of writing. As we talk about negative affects associated with writing, we consider how students might rework those affects in productive ways (as Micciche suggests), rather than falling into well-worn tropes about not liking writing or not being able to write. For example, when students say that they feel constrained by the rules of academic writing, we talk about the moves that are available to them even within academic genres and how they might play with their writing even within constraints that sometimes seem immutable.

These pedagogical suggestions derive from, and are therefore limited by, my research, which offers just one way of studying and theorizing writing affect. While I observed the workshop’s affective ecology, I can only guess at the affective environment of other spaces where these students do most of their writing. In interviews, many students described out-of-school scenes of writing, but few detailed their high school classroom environments, perhaps assuming that this information was self-evident. Additionally, I know little about the complex web of affective influences that make up these students’ writing histories. My research would benefit from sustained attention to writing environments and writing pasts. Future research could more fully situate the embodied writer in an affective milieu and could examine other elements of the writing ecology—in- and out-of-school. Still, my research does suggest that affect should be integral to Composition theory, research, and teaching. If we want students to both succeed in our classrooms and to persist as writers long after they leave, then it behooves us to understand what draws them to writing.

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Notes

1. Others have done excellent work addressing the affect/emotion dilemma (Nelson). My purpose is not to propose a resolution. Rather, I employ a capacious understanding of affect as a multiplicity of responses, including but not limited to those we call emotions.

2. The College of Education provides funding and facilities for the workshop, and the workshop’s co-director is a faculty member in the college. All other workshop faculty are district employees.

3. My activity during my first two years in the workshop—mentoring students—and my age, gender, and professional background may have caused students to view me as part of the workshop rather than as an outside observer. Even in the third year, when my involvement consisted of furiously typing fieldnotes and conducting interviews, some students thought I was affiliated with the workshop or College of Education in some way. For example, after one interview, a soft-spoken senior said, with apparent relief, “I thought I was in trouble!” Thus my own affect—my embodiment, my relationship with students and faculty, and my movement within the workshop—may have impacted the data. As evidence of this, students rarely criticized the workshop in interviews. In the journals, which were not composed for my research, students complain freely about the workshop.

4. I acknowledge the limitations of my ethnographic case study, which provides anecdotes and starting points for thinking about affect rather than generalizable results. I also acknowledge the limitations of any research that seeks to represent affect. Inspired by the philosophies of Gilles Deleuze and Brian Massumi, most affect theorists accept affect as virtual—a plane of immanence where anything can happen. Empirical research, in contrast, attempts to identify, harness, and isolate the object of study, as I do here. I present my research as a compromise. It allows me to say some things about students’ writing affect without pretending to have captured affect’s pure potentiality.

5. Amanda Lenhart et al. report similar findings.

Appendix A

1. When you aren’t in school or at this workshop, what do you like to do?
   
   *Probe:* Hobbies? Interests?

2. Why did you decide to come to this workshop?

3. What kind of writing do you do outside of school?
   
   *Probe:* How often do you do this kind of writing?

   *Probe:* What motivates you to do that writing?

   *Probe:* How comfortable are you sharing that writing with other people?

4. Think about the writing you do outside of school and try to describe what it feels
like for you—maybe describe where you are when you write or your emotions or thoughts or how your body feels.

5. How good do you think you are at this kind of writing?

6. How important do you think this kind of writing is?

7. How do you feel about the writing you do in school compared to the writing you do on your own?

8. Let’s do that same thing I asked you to do with your writing outside of school. Think about writing in school and try to describe what it feels like while you are writing—your body, emotions, thoughts, etc.

9. How good do you think you are at this kind of writing?

10. How important do you think it is to be able to write argument essays like the one you are writing here at the workshop?

   Probe: Where else do you think you might write an essay like this?

11. What kinds of writing do you see yourself doing in the future?

12. How important do you think writing is to your future?

Works Cited


—. “Writing Material.” *Reimagining the Social Turn*, special issue of *College English*, vol. 76, no. 6, 2014, pp. 488-505.


