

# “AM I UP FOR THIS?”: RE-SEEING A NONTRADITIONAL STUDENT’S CRITICAL ENCOUNTERS IN FYC

Adrienne Jankens

“The inability to recognize students’ acts of transfer has far-reaching (if not always immediately evident) consequences in individual classrooms and beyond.”

-Rebecca S. Nowacek, *Agents of Integration*, p. 11

“We act as if we have no power whatsoever in changing such language judgement practices—us, language teachers and researchers, have no power with language?”

-Asao B. Inoue, “How Do We Language,” p. 366

## Introduction

In Fall 2012, I was a graduate student and full-time, non-tenure track lecturer at a Midwestern urban research university. I was hired to teach first-year composition (FYC) and worked with my colleagues to understand how best to support students’ writing-related knowledge transfer. For my dissertation, I conducted a teacher research study of my FYC class to learn how to best support students’ transfer of writing-related knowledge from one project to the next in a course centered on inquiry, reflection, and rhetorical awareness. To do this, I took up John D. Bransford and Daniel L. Schwartz’s concept of preparation for future learning (PFL) to think through how students’ learning in one project or task prepared them for upcoming tasks (68). As Bransford and Schwartz describe, what makes PFL different from direct application transfer theories is a

focus on students' readiness for problem solving (69). Confident, as an experienced teacher, in the value of inquiry-based learning for PFL, I wanted to understand how students used question-asking and reflection to make rhetorical decisions in their assigned projects and whether and how these skills developed through the conditions for learning I employed in the classroom. The study helped me develop conclusions about the impact of directive teacher feedback in inquiry-based composition classrooms and about the ways students orient themselves as learners in relationship to their teacher and peers (Jankens).

But I finished that project understanding that I had more to learn from one student, David, who appears in several footnotes of the dissertation. I saw that a separate study of David's work negotiating this learning and writing context could be valuable for investigating how a nontraditional student encounters such moments in FYC. In his 60s, David was the oldest student in class, a tall, Black man returning to school after working for the auto industry. In that 2012 class, David actively participated during each meeting, responding to and raising questions. My one-on-one discussions with him often took place while other students were packing to leave the classroom. We mostly talked about politics and sports, but we also discussed his revision work and the dynamics of his classroom writing group. David often related that he felt he did not fit in with his classmates because he was older. He shared concerns about his performance in class, citing his age as one of the primary reasons for his challenges with technology and group work.

Like Anna V. Knutson's longitudinal case analysis of Grace, a student whose "resilience" in finding strategies for writing helps her work through her struggles (215), David's story is important for me to read into, because "only a case study will do [it] justice" (195). David's work in my class provides me with a way to look at rhetorical knowledge that does not fit within the typical, systematically determined frameworks of our discipline. As an older, returning student so much unlike other students in the class, David provides a compelling and important addition to how we think about studying

writing development and framing discussions of knowledge transfer.

Shifting my gaze from the research questions about PFL that drove the initial study, and instead looking at one student's experience in the class, allows me, as a teacher-researcher, to see more fully David's individual rhetorical experiences in the class, the critical encounters that shaped his learning. This shift in my research orientation helps me understand that David was recontextualizing and demonstrating rhetorical knowledge in different ways than I expected when I considered only the assigned projects and tasks as the potential locations of the manifestation of his PFL. This shift also helps me consider the ways that my own positionality, and the ways it has changed over time, influences how I assess students' learning as well as how I convey student learning in my research writing. I hope that the framework I offer and practice in this piece helps me share necessary action items for teachers and classroom researchers, not what may only be seen as "confessional narrative" (Diab et al. 22). In this work, I reflect on Rebecca Nowacek's point that "students' efforts to connect knowledge across boundaries are not always recognized or valued, either by their instructors, or by the theories that seek to explain these students' efforts" (10) and Asao B. Inoue's reminder of the pervasiveness and problem of the white naming of what knowledge counts in our classrooms ("How Do We Language"). I argue that this practice of shifting viewpoints and re-seeing students' experiences in our classrooms is integral to our reflexive inquiry as teachers and classroom researchers if we want this teaching and research work to have any productive and balanced ripple effect (Gorzelsky 82) on changing larger institutional ecologies.

To put David's case in a scholarly context, I first briefly review scholarship describing classroom and institutional ecologies and the study of knowledge development and transfer. Then, considering the flexibility we need to inhabit as researchers working to understand students' experiences in our writing courses, I draw from composition scholarship to "remix" and apply the notion of what I call *critical encounters* to David's work.

Finally, I reflect on what reviewing David's experience in light of these critical encounters helps me understand today as a teacher-researcher working at an urban university with a significant population of nontraditional students from various backgrounds. I invite readers to think about two questions as they explore David's experience with me: How do we work to better see the variety of students' own learning outcomes and development in our FYC classrooms? And how do we analyze and describe that work in our own writing, such that we remind ourselves that we need to look at what happens in our classrooms and listen to our students with intentional iteration and reflection?

## **Refocusing How Teachers and Classroom Researchers See Learning in FYC**

Scholarship on classroom ecologies and students' use of prior knowledge grounds my re-seeing of David's experience in my Fall 2012 FYC class. This scholarship also frames my argument about how researchers in composition can and should undertake a necessary flexibility in our research stances to see students' experiences more clearly, to understand students and their learning differently than we might through already-existing, top-down frameworks. This review focuses primarily, then, on work that explains *how* we should look at the elements of our classrooms (students included) and our positions in them, and how we (as teachers and researchers) might understand what students do with the knowledge and goals they bring with them to FYC.

Theoretical conceptions of classroom ecologies that highlight the social context of writing and learning (i.e., Postman and Weingartner; Cooper) were integral to the design of my class; their descriptions of the ways that elements of classroom and writing ecologies inform and influence each other highlight the reflexive influence of these ecological elements, whether or not the *people* in the ecology have an awareness of this influence. However, as Postman and Weingartner describe, "For this environment to fulfill its function, these elements must serve, complement, and derive meaning from each other" (52).

Building on these concepts, Inoue's exploration of anti-racist writing assessment ecologies acknowledges the power of material elements and various institutional relationships on social construction. Inoue also demands our attention to the ways race and class manifest in our traditional classrooms and larger institutions, and how disparities can be mitigated with careful attention at the classroom level (*Antiracist*). This call is reinforced in his 2019 CCCC Chair's Address, in which Inoue reminds us of the necessity of "deep attending" (363), of white bodies realizing the power of their privilege and the ways that classroom judgments have emerged from a history of white language supremacy (356-357), and then, the necessity of constantly problematizing and enacting change in these systems (367). Thus, we must understand our FYC classrooms not as impersonal theoretical ecologies, but as breathing, living systems in which we can re-enact the same power structures the academy was formed in, or in which we can better work on learning (with) students, knowing that this work will come with discomfort, but must happen (Inoue, "How Do We Language," 366; Spack 27).

Foundational for students' college experiences, this contextually fraught FYC classroom is also central to studies of knowledge transfer, positioned as it is between high school language arts classes and writing intensive courses in undergraduate majors. Composition scholars studying transfer have worked to understand the influence of students' prior writing knowledge on their experience in FYC. Arguing for FYC as an "important bridge course between contexts," Angela Rounsaville et al. look to understand how "prior discursive resources" impact how students enter into and engage with new writing tasks (98-99). They conclude that explicitly prompting students to draw from these prior resources is key for enabling what Gavriel Salomon and David N. Perkins call high road transfer, or transfer based in mindful abstraction of a concept or skill (Rounsaville et al. 108). In exploring students' negotiation between prior and new genres in FYC, Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi find that students who are more confident in their prior genre knowledge are more likely to "guard" that knowledge, and those

who can identify key strategies and engage in abstraction are more likely to “cross” successfully into new genres (325-328). Knutson’s study of Grace shows that students’ understanding of how they are working with prior knowledge can add to their development of both extracurricular and curricular strategies for developing as writers (208).

The field’s work on understanding this transfer has resulted in a rich and descriptive vocabulary for describing what happens in these learning moments, like Reiff and Bawarshi’s boundary crossers and guarders. For example, Kathleen Blake Yancey et al. offer the terms *assemblage*, *remixing*, and *critical incidents* to name different ways that students successfully or unsuccessfully deal with prior knowledge to build new knowledge (Yancey et al. 5). Nowacek’s description of students as “agents of integration” meaningfully shifts the transfer dynamic into students’ control by placing emphasis on students “seeing and selling” knowledge transfer, shifting away from an idea that teachers, with their institutional power, are the only agents who can recognize and reward successful knowledge transfer (37-39). Nowacek’s work, especially, helps us begin to see ways that even the PFL model, with its focus on preparation for problem-solving instead of discrete application of concepts and skills (Bransford and Schwartz 69), could prove limited *if* the possibilities for PFL are limited to the teacher’s intentions for student learning or knowledge transfer.

The experiences of nontraditional students in FYC remind us that teaching for transfer and studying knowledge development cannot be formulaic, because our students are not formulaic. Understanding students’ dispositions toward learning and writing is one way to develop our understanding of student learning with more depth and context without relying on mere “snapshot[s] of ability” (Slomp 82). And helping students understand their dispositions toward learning and writing is a valuable “service” that writing teachers can provide (Kerr 117). Michelle Navarre Cleary’s case studies of two adult learners and their transfer of process knowledge lead her to argue that learners are more likely to invest in writing when the writing tasks align with their personal goals

and life situations (680). Corinne Hinton, studying veterans in an FYC class, recommends explicitly prompting connection-making to honor the prior knowledge nontraditional students bring to their college experience, a teaching strategy that would seem to “count” this knowledge seriously. Navarre Cleary argues that nontraditional students are more likely to “internalize” input from peers about their writing and other strategies for recontextualizing when they experience investment in a class (678). So it is evident that nontraditional students must feel the value of a course to successfully recontextualize prior knowledge and engage in future knowledge transfer, to engage PFL. That’s integral for FYC teachers to know, but even studying knowledge development and transfer through a framework of dispositions does not provide us all the context we need to understand students’ experiences.

Our studies of student learning, like our classroom teaching, need to be recursively problematized, as we determine theoretical frameworks, the analysis of classroom artifacts, and our positionality as teachers and researchers (Inoue, “How Do We Language,” 360). As Ruth E. Ray, reviewing Janet Miller’s work with teacher-collaborators, explains, when teacher-researchers write through their work, “they reconceptualize teaching as a process that is not only historically and socially formed, but *also individually created and re-created*,” an orientation that readies them for change-making (294, emphasis mine). Regarding the above summary of scholarship, it is important to note that what counts as unsuccessful or successful transfer is still up for scholarly conversation, and Inoue reminds us of our power to determine what counts in our classrooms (366). We need to understand how students express and value specific knowledge. Then, as teachers, we can draw on this understanding for teaching, and as researchers, we can select or develop frameworks that allow us to best present those teaching and learning experiences.

Ideally, this knowledge is co-constructed with students, though I approach David’s experience in my Fall 2012 class in what now feels like another lifetime, working to “see through [his] lenses in

addition to looking more clearly through my own” (Fleischer 37). In my re-reading of David’s case, below, I aim to do this more careful seeing, shifting the course’s structured plans for students’ PFL meaningfully out of my sight as I work through David’s experience, bearing in mind the tensions described above. David’s case adds to the body of case studies of knowledge transfer or writing development (e.g., McCarthy; Beaufort; Navarre Cleary; Knutson), by giving us the perspective of an older Black student in a group of mostly white, eighteen-year-old college freshmen, the perspective of a student who brought with him to the class an orientation of persistence and a disposition toward learning from others and contributing meaningfully to their work.

## **An FYC Experience at an Urban Research University**

To understand the institutional layers in which I read my study initially and again now, David’s case needs to be contextualized in the teaching and research that was happening in our university’s composition program at the time. Our program annually serves approximately 2,500 students in first-year classes and is housed in an English department that promotes an undergraduate English major, minors in creative writing and professional writing, and graduate degrees in creative writing, literary and cultural studies, film and media studies, linguistics, and rhetoric and writing studies. In 2012, our mostly white instructor cohort for FYC included five recently hired full-time lecturers, several graduate assistant instructors, and part-time faculty, with tenure-track faculty sometimes, but rarely, teaching the course. At the time, the university’s neighborhood was in the beginning stages of a revitalization that has since brought more dining and retail to the area. Then, and now, the student body is largely a commuting one, with many students both working full- or part-time and attending school full-time. According to a 2018 report, in 2011 the six-year graduation rate for Black, first-time students was only 20%<sup>6</sup>; since that time our university has made significant, nationally recognized progress on graduation rates.

Because we were hired specifically to support student retention, our lecturer cohort investigated curricula and instructional practices that would better prepare students at our urban research university for the writing they would do across their coursework, after or while taking general education composition. We particularly wanted to understand the metacognitive aspects of transfer. In my dual role as graduate student and faculty member, I designed my dissertation study to investigate students' PFL through question-asking and reflection on rhetorical decision-making. I created a project sequence that moved students from practicing inquiry and research, to crafting researched arguments, to designing artifacts in various genres that could support this work. In my introduction to the assignment sequence in the syllabus, I wrote,

The assignments below reflect a progression from exploring your prior, individual knowledge and experience to building knowledge as a community of learners—from understanding yourself to thinking about how you operate as a part of a community of writers and to working with other members of that community on writing about an important issue.

These assignments included the following: 1) an About Me page on students' WordPress blogs, describing the student's primary and secondary discourses; 2) an I-Search paper on an inquiry related to a discourse community in which the student had membership; 3) a genre analysis of discourse community texts; 4) a collaborative argument essay evaluating a problem in one group member's discourse community, paired with a multimodal proposal presentation; and 5) a reflective argument essay evaluating the student's progress on course learning outcomes, accompanied by a portfolio of student work. This work was supported by demonstration of inquiry and reflection, in-class brainstorming, small group collaborative writing, written reflections, and regular feedback on written work.

As part of my IRB-approved classroom study of learning in this

inquiry-based classroom, I took field notes on class sessions (jotting down notes in class and then typing up more complete notes after each session), audiotaped several class sessions, and collected all student writing for analysis. Fifteen of the twenty-four students in the class participated in the study; four of the study participants were Black, one Asian, and ten white. All but three of the students in the study were first-semester, first-year students.

## **Exploring David's Experience in Light of *Critical Encounters***

In my initial study, I assessed my own efficacy in setting the conditions for learning as I worked to understand students' transfer of writing-related knowledge between assignments. However, I learn something new when I reflect on David's experience outside of this knowledge transfer framework and outside of my own teacher efficacy. When I look at what happens between David and his classmates and between David and the "stuff" of the course, I see how he works through learning problems in several critical encounters, though these encounters are not always what I had planned when I worked to structure students' PFL. In this article, I use the term *critical encounters* to refer to moments when ecological elements iteratively bump up against and influence each other, reflecting Inoue's description of an antiracist writing assessment ecology as "an assemblage of dancing elements" (*Antiracist* 120). *Critical encounters* is the phrase that naturally emerged when I started more closely reflecting on and writing about David's experience. *Critical encounters* in a writing classroom refer to

- Experienced (not necessarily planned) learning moments in the classroom ecology
- Iterative encounters between two or more elements of the classroom ecology
- Moments where prior knowledge comes to bear on learning in ways that can reshape components of the classroom ecology

This phrase echoes Yancey et al.'s "critical incidents" in that it points to moments that are integral ("critical") to moving toward positive transfer. It differs, however, in two ways. First, Yancey et al. describe "critical incidents" also as "setbacks" wherein students need to revise their practice to move forward (35). A critical encounter, however, may or may not result in revision; it may, for example, result in persistence. Second, critical encounters may not represent single moments in time. Consider how we encounter a scholarly text as new readers each time we read it, or how a familiar film beloved in high school incites a different level of emotional reaction later in life. My use of the phrase critical encounters also draws from Shari J. Stenberg's "learning encounters," which Stenberg uses to describe moments wherein teacher-learners "participate in ongoing inquiry, to encounter an ever-present series of changes in themselves, their students, the classroom, the field" (134). These "mutually beneficial" encounters can transform the field, says Stenberg (134). Stenberg's description encouraged me to move beyond the moments that *I* thought would be incidental (i.e., formal writing assignments, reflection tasks) into acknowledging moments from David's experience that *actually* served as key learning encounters. A concept of critical encounters allows me a more open look at what happens when student meets student, or student meets text, or student meets technology. I label David's experience in the class with four critical encounters: blogging, writing a research paper, whole class dialogue, and navigation of the physical classroom and a collaborative writing group (two concepts I leave together because they are difficult to tease apart). David's persistence with each encounter evidences his rhetorical openness and responsibility and shows that there is more to understand about his learning than could be seen through the limited way I used the PFL framework to determine where students would work through potential learning problems.

In re-seeing David's experience, I also reflect on my own position as teacher and researcher in that 2012 classroom, and thus this review serves as a critical encounter of my own. The

first aspect of this critical encounter, for me, is better attending to my positionality. Jane Zeni et al. write, “When we, as teacher-researchers, do not locate ourselves and our own cultures in the research we do, our fieldnotes may simply reveal the old stereotypes” (113). To be responsible researchers, the authors assert, we cannot pretend cultural invisibility. “Instead,” they write, “we can choose to let ourselves be seen, to include the dimensions of our own cultures in the classroom data, and to let our relationships with students challenge our cultural assumptions” (122). I think, upon reflection, that what was likely most apparent to my students in that semester was my age (I was in my early thirties), and my role as a mother (I was four months pregnant with my third child when the semester began). What was likely not as apparent to the students in my class was that the composition and pedagogical theories underpinning my practice were drawn from mostly white scholars, male and female. While the assigned readings in my class explored discourse community and voice as concepts, and addressed a multiplicity of experiences of students, researchers, and writers, they also mostly represented white authors. While this was not something apparent to me in my initial structuring of the class (I was drawing from texts I was made familiar with in my own graduate coursework through two institutions) my reflection on it now is integral for understanding the experiences David had throughout the semester. Such a curricular structure reinforces Inoue’s description of the racism inherent in our institutions.

The second aspect of this critical encounter, for me, is this larger shift of my researcher perspective. Teacher research, as the “systematic study” of one’s classroom (Blakeslee and Fleischer 99), requires the teacher researcher to at once inhabit the role of teacher who has intimate knowledge of the purposes, processes, and players of the classroom setting *and* researcher, who can work to see the whole context not only in light of theoretical frameworks but also in terms of systemic realities. It is the “intuitive knowing” Donald Schon describes reflective practitioners bringing to their classroom studies (ix) that I work to better attend to, acknowledging that in the

way I attended to PFL in my initial study I limited my understanding of what I could learn from each student in the class, namely David. As a teacher-researcher, I hope to better take on the role of “ecologist” that Marilyn Cooper describes in her discussion of writing ecologies (368) as I explore David’s experience in my class through these four critical encounters, and I hope to demonstrate a flexible teacher research stance that “reconstruct[s] the play” (Spack 17) of my study through this different view.

## Blogging

David’s experiences with blogging in the class, as revealed in his written reflections, show how his own purposes for blogging were just as significant as, if not more important than, my perceived teacher-driven objectives. Our weekly blogging in class began the first day when I asked students to make individual WordPress blogs that I linked to our central course site so students could read, respond to, and reference each other’s work throughout the semester. Project 1 was an About Me page in which students were invited to take inspiration from Langston Hughes’ “Theme for English B” and/or from James Gee’s concepts of primary and secondary Discourses to introduce themselves and explore their previous writing experiences. Creating individual blogs allowed students initial play with rhetorical decision-making and practice applying key course vocabulary.

David completed this project in two blog posts: the first, a response to “Theme for English B,” and the second, an exploration of his personal history and primary Discourse. In his first post, David begins by writing about the speaker of the poem,

*I can identify with him. It is hard to be the only colored person  
in class. I can relate to that as I am the oldest in class. It hard to  
write a theme for english using a blog.*

In these sentences, David makes key statements about his challenges entering this composition course: at sixty-three, he is

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significantly older than the other students, and he is unfamiliar with some of the technologies required in the course. Concluding his post, he writes,

*Finally, I had a hard time of doing this posting on my blog. It was the first time I am using this system. I hope that I had satisfy your assignment.*

Discussing strategies for writing, David describes the templates in one of the textbooks as “hard” to use:

*It take some practice to do and remember what you are trying to say. The strategies that I use before was simply you just try to tell a story to your listener.*

This storytelling approach is evident in the second post of David’s project, where he traces his personal history from childhood through joining the Navy after high school. He begins,

*The question of who am I? Is not important then, Where did I come from? or Why am I here? Where did I come from? shows so much of ourself that it bring all the discourse of who am I. The mire thought of you, and all that you know, is where you came from.*

Whether David is speaking about a geographic origin or a more abstract shaping through experience, I don’t know, but what comes through in this post is that it is not the individual as he is at present (“who am I?”) that is important. Rather, when he is thinking about why he is taking part in our composition course, David seems to consider a sense of origin and lifelong purpose. For David, this idea of history and narrative will be important throughout the semester. David’s post displays attention to how one’s background shapes one’s present experience, a concept that would be important in our next project, the I-Search, and is representative of some of the concepts of personal ethos that David explores in later posts and discussions.

In his Project 1 reflection, David also writes about the medium of the blog and the use of communication technology more broadly:

*My readings of my classmates' blogs posting have not developed yet, I find it hard to navigate around those blogs. I don't have a real feel about blogging. The more we discuss in the classroom helps me more than those blogs. I don't think that anyone read my posting or what I think about their work. Blogging is for those who text a lot or spend a lot of time on their cell phone. I am still working on my own blog. I have learned a lot about writing that I had not before, mainly, there are some many ways of communicating than before.*

In this reflection, I see David understands one of the pedagogical intentions of the blog posts—that I hope students will read each other's blogs—but also that he does not see this intention as applicable to him, nor does he think his classmates will learn anything from his blog (a feeling that emerges again in a later reflection, explored below). He finds class discussions more useful but counts blogging as part of learning about new writing media.

In his reflective argument essay, written in the final week of the semester, David begins by discussing learning in a computer classroom and his initial challenges in the course:

*First, there were those computers; I have never been in an English classroom before where there were so many computers. Second, before even blogging I had to get into the computer where the assignments were posted. Third, I had to learn to blog, which I had not done before.*

He describes the problems he had posting his first blog, and writes,

*I am the oldest in my classroom so I figure that I could use my experience that I had in others classes to handle any trouble with any assignments. I just need to get over those computers.*

This moment in his essay suggests David is aware of certain dispositions toward learning that are required for his success: persistence and a willingness to draw from previous learning experiences. He reports progress with his use of technology:

*You know what; I have conquest the reality of blogging. Matter of fact I done pretty good at blogging. Come to think of it, my impression of computers has change when it comes to English. Now almost all my writing comes from computers.*

This moment in David's essay indicates a sense that mastering writing with technology equals mastering how to use the technology and indicates positive learning for a student whose initial block in the class was the blog.

If I only consider David's use of the blog for engaging in collaborative learning or rhetorical play (two of my pedagogical intentions), my analysis of his recontextualization of prior knowledge (as PFL) in this final reflection may show me that his apparent focus on technical skills seems to miss some of the more nuanced rhetorical and genre knowledge that I wanted us to develop as we moved between writing occasions. Essentially, he can use WordPress to compose and post a blog, and can use computer applications for other writing, but does not write about the rhetorical limitations and affordances of these technologies. However, if I look at David's critical encounters with blogging and computer writing more broadly, I see a student who, through persistence and attention to engaging with these technologies, meaningfully reflects on his experiences in writing, and develops a relative confidence with these technologies. These two outcomes, one metacognitive, and one dispositional, are likely more valuable for David's continued learning than understanding all of the nuances of the rhetorical situation of a blog. His learning, then, moves beyond *my* objective for the blog into something more personal and meaningful for him.

## Research-Writing and Storytelling

While the class included two major research projects—the I-Search and a collaborative evaluation/proposal argument—here I explore David’s critical encounter with research-writing in the I-Search only, because it provides a compelling example of how his perspective of writing (what he wrote in his About Me) manifests in this project as a valuable rhetorical outcome that I did not examine in my teaching that semester or my initial study. We worked on the I-Search over a four-week period, during which we talked through crafting inquiries and engaging in primary research to develop inductive claims. In a blog post, David makes clear his research plans:

*My initial ideas for Project 2 is “Going Fishing”. I had some friend who fish and they said they had a good time. The first question is where and what license do I need? I will call the Fish and Wild Game Department to find the answers. What type of bait to use for fishing? I will ask my friends who fish regular about what bait they use for fishing. Where are the fish biting? I find out through my friends and others who fish regularly. I also can look at the people [...] who fish off the pier. What is the best place to go for fishing? I can look up fishing in the City Magazine or ask my friend who catches fish on a regular basis.*

Here, David drafts initial questions on the logistics of fishing and includes a variety of research possibilities: telephone inquiries, conversations with friends, observations of people fishing locally, and secondary research through a local magazine. For an I-Search, it is a robust initial research plan, combining primary and secondary research, and reflecting the kinds of engagement Macrorie describes (56). In a blog, David writes about what he hopes to explore:

*I know little about fishing. I want someday to go fishing with my friend. He has a boat and tell me that its lot of fun. The last time I went fishing, I was around five or six. I never thought about it*

*much. But the time has come when there only so much that you can do to enjoy yourself. I writing this paper to find others way to have a little fun with others and fishing is one of those thing that don't cost a lot of money. You can sit in the shade and wait for the fish to bite. Anyone can do it, the old and the young along can go fishing. We will have a good time I bet.*

Here, David relies on personal anecdotes (“*The last time I went fishing, I was around five or six*”) and on his guesses about what fishing is like to think about what he will learn through his research. His questions center on navigating the social aspects of the community, and in his paper, David explores his ability to handle the physical aspects of fishing:

*Am I up for this? Can I handle the pressure of bring in a boat for a long period of time? Am I physical enough? What if something goes wrong, like a water leak or some accident, can I handle it?*

These initial posts set out several possibilities for the writing and research practices I hoped students would practice: a combination of primary and secondary research that helped them identify the best research strategies and sources for their research questions, to explore the discourse communities or secondary discourses they identified as important in their lives. For David, this meant exploring a leisure activity that was important to others in his social circle and often came up in conversation. Though he began with strong research plans, one of my challenges helping David write about this research was supporting his movement from narrating his conversation with his friends (something he focused on during our one-on-one conference for the project) to reframing a research question that better tied fishing to the concept of discourse. In my responses to his narration in our conference, I brought up Gee’s “ways of being” and “identity kit” as possibilities for making this connection. He talked about finding out what fishing does for his friends’ relationships with each other.

Midway through researching and drafting the I-Search, I asked students to read their drafts aloud to themselves and to write a reflection about what they heard or felt while reading. David's reflection emphasizes the feeling of his draft, and he turns to issues with communicating ideas to his audience, something he also writes about in earlier posts:

*I have a feeling that I can't get to what I really trying to tell my listeners. There is a rhythm to writing, and I can't find it. I can feel the rhythm, but I can't find it.*

He also struggles with the revision process, writing,

*I might rewrite the whole paper to sound like what I want it to be. I fine part of the paper that I like and other part I don't like. If I take apart the whole paper then I risk losing the ideal that I trying to get to. This is a challenge for me, to find that balance between the like and dislike.*

For David, communicating this feeling centers on a memory of a friend. He writes,

*Jack one of my best friend, pass away long time ago. While I was writing my draft the picture of him flashed in my mind. I thought about the time we spend together. I try to caught that feel on paper and bring that feel to my listeners in my writing.*

Overall, in this reflection David reiterates his concerns with communicating a story to an audience as well as his strategy of working from memory to begin to write.

Ultimately, David's I-Search was weighted more heavily on the narrative side, and less heavily on the kind of primary research venture that Macrorie's description intends or that I wanted students to engage in. His conclusion captures the narrative spirit present in his About Me posts. He writes,

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*“Going fishing” is really just about two or more guys in a fishing boat. They are doing something that they like. The whole world could stop for a moment: just relax sitting and waiting for that fish to bite. In the middle of the water where time doesn’t count, this is the place to be, they tell me. I know it can be peaceful, when my wife and I go on cruises, or the time I spend in the Navy, I know the skies can be blue: I know that the water can be healing, but, I don’t know about being in a small boat. I guess I would like to try it. One day, I will take them up on their offer.*

This descriptive passage demonstrates the oral storytelling approach David finds integral to meaningful writing, according to his earlier reflections. He follows this paragraph up with a one-sentence statement:

*In conclusion: I don’t think that I will be going fishing this year, however, I still hopeful for next year.*

In this closing sentence, David seems to work to include a more academic conclusion, one that he feels conforms to both his conception of formal college writing (“*In conclusion*”) and to the conventions of the I-Search (identifying future plans).

The I-Search, as we employ it in our composition courses at our university, plays out as a complex genre: part narrative, part reflection, part research report (Jankens 81). We use the project to support students in their practice with conducting and writing about research and to help them develop inductive claims that allow them to bridge more easily into crafting argumentative claims in future projects. In my initial analysis of David’s paper, I noticed that while David worked to take on genre conventions of the I-Search, employing a descriptive narrative, his emphasis on storytelling overshadowed other aspects of the research project. For example, while he incorporated personal anecdotes that illustrated his interest in finding ways to spend time with friends (“*One day we went to the race track, we both got a program. He had his horses that he would bet*

on, and I had mines”), his discussion of a more present, immersive primary research experience was limited to incorporating indirect quotations from conversations with his friends about fishing. In my previous analysis of his I-Search, I wrote that had David better been able to integrate the more research-centered components of the paper, it “would have made the I-Search a more meaningful project” (Jankens 99). I saw David holding close to his prior knowledge about writing, seemingly only making surface-level genre moves to mirror I-Search conventions, and I saw it as a problem with his ability to recontextualize his prior knowledge about writing in the face of this complex genre.

But I kind of hate that analysis now for a few reasons. First, there is something to be said about David’s persistence with the project. David failed to engage in primary research in the way I wanted him to, relying on conversations with his friends instead of stepping more outside of his comfort zone to learn about fishing, even though he had developed plans for more robust research. However, David demonstrated persistence in working through trying to tell the story of his interest in fishing in the way that he felt captured the “*rhythm*” he was looking for and referenced in the reflection on his draft. His integration of surface-level I-Search features may demonstrate a stronger shift into employing the writing expectations of the course than I noticed when I only compared him with his classmates. David’s classmates encountered the I-Search with relatively recent experiences with research writing in high school or previous college courses. David, on the other hand, encountered this project with a significantly larger gap in writing experience. This alone does not make his work on the I-Search somehow remarkable, though it can change the nature of my analysis. I could instead ask of David, or of any student in my class, what *was* his prior knowledge about writing, and in what ways is he playing with or remixing that prior knowledge as he works through this first major paper of the course?

Second, while I have spent time reflecting on instructional approaches that might have limited or supported David’s work with prior knowledge in our class, this again was reflective and

analytical work I did with my own pedagogical intentions in mind. My initial study showed me that I could have been more directive in my feedback to students on their I-Search drafts if I hoped they would research and write in particular ways. But I might instead ask what goals for writing David brought to the experience of writing the I-Search, and to what degree these goals were realized in his final draft.

Finally, in labeling David's I-Search as a potential failure to recontextualize knowledge about research writing, I may miss some of the more human moments of the text, written by a student who speaks and writes throughout the semester about valuing collaboration and connecting with others. David explores the connections between the past and the present:

*Therefore, when I see Jameson, Allan, and Herbert, talk about fishing. It reminds me of Jack and when we was working together in The Old [Automotive] Plant.*

And he directly states his valuing of personal reasons for learning how to fish over and above the practical experience:

*On the other hand, fishing means more to me then catching some fish. I am looking for the human aliment that bond people together.*

These poignant moments in David's writing show a student who, faced with the task of engaging in primary research, demonstrated his learning by crafting a text that drew on an understanding of narrative as "critical to knowledge production" (Williams-Farrier 253) and developed thematic connections between fishing and friendship, speaking to David's valuing of relationships.

## **Whole-Class Dialogue**

David explained at various moments in the class that discursive spaces like the blog were not as helpful to him as classroom dialogue for developing knowledge about writing and texts, and while I

looked at both blogs and classroom dialogue in my initial study, I re-read dialogue here to understand David alone, not in comparison with his classmates' learning. In a reflection composed later in the semester, David highlights his preference for learning from discussion:

*I felt that class discussions help out a lot in indentifying different writing skills and different pattern of writing in this class. Luke and I are both veterans and he is writing about veterans here at [our university]. We had a good discussion about veterans which help me to see where I could influence him to open up more about himself.*

When the class discussed a sample I-Search on the value of living in residence halls, David offered thoughts about how the student writer engaged in primary research in his dorm:

David: He lives in a community where everybody was involved.

Me: Mhmm.

David: We're living outside a community where we don't know people and are faced with other people.

Me: Right.

David: So it made him more conducive towards the people.

Me: That's a good point. Yup, for, um, for the research that Mike was doing in this paper, it made the access to others very simple. Right? [...]

David: Also time and distance counts.

Me: Mhmm.

David: Because if you live further out, the longer the time. For closer in, the shorter the time.

Me: That's true. Um, and that's why, that's part of why, we're taking this Wednesday and next Wednesday "off" right? [...] if you need to go somewhere to get materials or to observe something or whatever, or even just to take extra time to look things up on the internet, you've got that time. Uh, but that's something you have to consider when you are planning primary research like an interview or going to do an observation is, uh, it's very likely that that's not stuff you can do like the night before the project is due. You've got to think ahead. Who would I like to talk to, when will I do that?

This dialogue excerpt demonstrates a challenge I had, often feeling I needed to rephrase or reframe David's statements in order to make them amenable to the discussion at hand. However, the dialogue without reframing also shows David working to bridge his understanding of the sample essay with his own research experience. Without my reframing for the benefit of the whole class, David still works through his prior knowledge in light of this new learning moment.

Reading this short snapshot of dialogue now, in light of David's overall experience in the class, something else stands out to me. His statement, "we are living outside of a community where we don't know people and are faced with other people," may reflect more than just his experience researching a discourse community—it may also reflect his experience in the class as a whole. He's speaking directly about the sample paper, but as a student, he is "living" both outside and inside the academic discourse community he is entering: he is from a different generation; he is at the end of a professional career; he is one of three Black students in the class; he is the only male,

Black, and older student in his writing group; he is in a writing class that is often used as a gatekeeping course.

Overall, when I read what I have captured of David's conversational contributions to the class, I see better how these conversations were a valuable site for him to build knowledge about rhetoric and writing. As I describe below, this strategy was somewhat challenged by some of the physical and social aspects of the class.

### **The Physical Classroom and the Writing Group**

The classroom space was a challenge for all of us, and David's experience highlights the multiple hurdles we worked through both accessing class materials and responding to the orientation of desks, chairs, and projector, challenges which shaped our rhetorical interactions. Because of the technology setup, which included four six-desk stations of computers in a small room, my instructional planning relied heavily on student access to material through the computers. Almost all course materials and assignments were posted on a class blog, and students created their own blogs for posting assignments and used Blackboard for submitting final projects. For many students, negotiating this technology took only a few class periods. In David's case, as described above, this took a little longer. However, while David eventually became used to using the course tools, the classroom setup continued to frustrate him and several other students who related problems with the physical classroom setup that were particularly heightened while they worked on the collaborative research essay. In a post-class conversation later in the semester, David talked to me about his attempts to engage his group, which included him and four female first-year students, in discussion:

When class was over I asked David how the group was working. I told him I overheard him talking about an iPad initiative the Rockin' Burgers business was incorporating. Is it for customer relations? I asked him. He explained ways

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that the app would be useful for customers and also for workers (to help them remember how to prepare drinks, etc.). He tells me the group wasn't interested in the idea, and I suggested that maybe that was because their focus is on management to employee communications instead of customer relations. But I encouraged him to speak up when the group is brainstorming for ideas for the proposal genre. I keep trying, he said. He explained how Felicity runs the group and talks to the twins and they don't say anything. He described his attempts to engage the other people in discussion, but they don't respond. I encouraged him again to use that brainstorming ability when it is time to work on the proposal. He cited the seating arrangement as difficult because the computers hamper communication. He thinks that if everyone moves their chairs around to one side of the table, it would work better. David describes how, when they worked in the library, he found them a room, and when they started talking, everyone got up and left the room and went to go work at computers instead of talking about the project.

Clearly the communication problems in this group extended beyond the classroom itself, following them into the library, and were likely based in social issues rather than physical constraints. However, the desk configuration in our classroom did not facilitate group interaction. Several class periods later when I conferenced with this group, I tried to demonstrate this seating problem to them. As I joined them, I realized I could not see everyone, so I moved to the end of the table and explained that now I could make eye contact with each person. Unfortunately, their seating habits did not change.

David struggled to engage his group the same way he was able to contribute to whole-class discussions. In a reflection, he relates awareness of group roles:

*I see my group project as a learning experience for me to find my way into the group. I am the oldest member in my class and the most experience member of the class. I just try to fit into the group without being over burden to the group. I know now that I lost valuable time by bring up ideas that my group have rejected. I am not as proficient in the communication skillfulness as my group members, but I bring to the table a wealth of knowledge. My group is the most intelligence in the class and I am proud of them. Felicity, the chairperson done a fantastic job. I just wish that I could have been more helpful.*

David's awareness of the interpersonal and rhetorical relationships of the class, as written in this reflection, covers several areas: his position and identity as "*the oldest*" and "*most experience[d]*," his efforts to find a productive way of contributing to his writing group, his valuing of others' strengths in contributing to the class, and his identification of ways he can contribute to others' learning outside of his writing group. David's reflections on his group's work together seem to overlook the physical challenges to these rhetorical interactions that I saw and wrote about in my initial study but highlight what David found more significant: his challenges communicating as an older student and his desire to contribute meaningfully to group knowledge production.

### **Implications for Teaching and Classroom Research**

As David's case study has emerged from my original study of PFL in FYC, I find that looking more intently at his experiences helps me think differently about both his learning and my work as a teacher-researcher. I have labeled David's work in these four areas—with blogging (and computers), research writing and storytelling, whole-class dialogue, and the physical classroom and his writing group's work in it—as critical encounters because through each of these iterative encounters, David either persists to develop knowledge in various ways or I am able to identify something significant about his rhetorical learning that did not

fit into the discrete learning outcomes I initially examined in my study. In this case, a framework of critical encounters helps me look beyond the frame of my original research questions to other ways students may have experienced developing rhetorical knowledge, as well as other outcomes they may have taken from or contributed to the class. While in my initial study I was paying special attention to PFL between the writing tasks I designed for the course, looking at David's case in isolation helps me see how, outside of the narrow definitions I was examining then, he brought a wealth of rhetorical knowledge to class discussions and worked persistently to develop that knowledge through drafting, revision, reflection, conferences, and discussions.

David's experience as a nontraditional FYC student offers an interesting third case study to Navarre Cleary's argument. Like Tiffany in Navarre Cleary's study, David sticks close to his prior knowledge as he works through the initial stages of the class. He uses his understanding of writing as storytelling to push through his I-Search. Unlike Tiffany, David does not display resistance to adapting to prescribed course conventions, and furthermore, he states a belief in being able to learn from his peers, even when social challenges put this learning at risk. Doppel, in Navarre Cleary's study, is identified as more likely to "seek connections between his prior and new learning" because he considers himself an academic writer (678). In contrast, David does not consider himself an academic writer for most of the class. His reflections early in the semester show his sense of a neophyte status. However, later in the semester, David describes a confidence that he has something to offer to his classmates' learning and that he understands how to work with course technologies.

David's responses to his rhetorical engagement with others in class show that he is "up" for these critical encounters in FYC. David shows his readiness when he reflects on his engagement with his writing group and his classmate, Luke, describing his various attempts to share ideas and create possibilities for collaborative knowledge-making, whether or not these are taken up by his

classmates. He demonstrates this readiness when he moves from not having a “*real feeling*” for blogs at the beginning of the semester to being “*pretty good*” at it at the end of the term. He recognizes his rhetorical agency when he offers perspectives on primary research in a class discussion, attempting to construct this knowledge for his own purposes and the benefit of his classmates.

I see that in looking at David in comparison with other students in the class in my initial study I did not describe fully enough our experiences together as moments of developing rhetorical knowledge, though these responsive moments are present in the project alongside analysis of data representing students’ recontextualization of prior knowledge about college writing. What David experiences rhetorically in the class gives me a lot to learn from as a teacher and teacher-researcher. I encourage the re-reading of his story, and of other students in our formal studies, to help us better attend to the ways that scholarly or institutional frameworks may limit our thinking about what students bring to our classrooms.

I hope that this approach to studying student learning—a purposeful re-seeing beyond an initial study—usefully complicates our certainties about how students are experiencing and demonstrating their learning in our composition classrooms, particularly through identifying student successes outside of top-down theoretical, institutional or programmatic frameworks. In that way, I hope this approach also supports antiracist orientations toward research and assessment of student learning, orientations that help us think critically about our conceptual frameworks to understand “how to study and intervene in what we see” (Condon and Young 13), even and especially as teachers and classroom researchers who have the power to write different classroom experiences for the students who come to us.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I use pseudonyms for students in the study and the friends and specific locations David writes about. The study I describe was approved by my university's institutional review board: IRB-077012B3E.

<sup>2</sup> Ray lists an unpublished paper by Miller on this point in her works cited.

<sup>3</sup>As widely reported in media, including in an NPR story from May 14, 2019, in 2011, our university's six-year graduation rate for Black students whose parents also attended college was 9%, though this number has been hard to find on university websites.

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