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VOICES SEEN AND HEARD

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VOICES SEEN AND HEARD

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# VOICES SEEN AND HEARD: COMICS AND NEO-EXPRESSIVISM IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

Michelle Fern Cohen

*Permitting, or encouraging, students to produce their own comics ... opens up a whole new understanding of authorship and authority that may have transformative effects. (Sealey-Morris, 48)*

*Apparently, Peter Elbow is cool again. (Hilst, n.p.)*

In the summer of 2014, I taught a unit on visual rhetoric to a group of gifted high school students, concluding with a hands-on comics activity. Students first read Scott McCloud's chapter "The Vocabulary of Comics" to learn more about the medium, and they marveled in class discussion at his complex investigation of human identity through icon (see figure 1). They then individually or collaboratively created comics that would teach future classes a

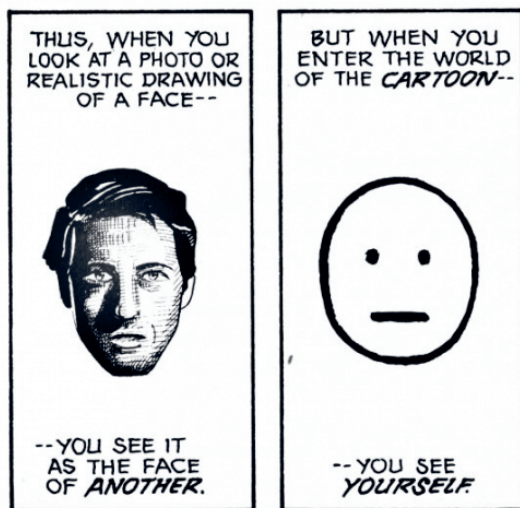


Figure 1. Scott McCloud argues that the abstract style of cartoons allows readers to superimpose their own identity. (Excerpted from McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, p. 36)

concept they had learned in the course.

The results were sophisticated visual-verbal summaries and applications of course content, from methods of rhetorical analysis to Robin Williams' principles of design.<sup>1</sup> Yet the student comics were also playful, strange, curious, and creative.<sup>2</sup> As a collection, they appeared simultaneously to inform, entertain, and self-express, borrowing from McCloud's vocabulary and techniques while employing a range of drawing styles and a wide cast of narrators. Specifically, students elected to narrate their comics by cartooning scholars we had read in class or by creating new characters, several of whom appeared to have features similar to the students themselves; additionally, nonhuman characters included a cactus, burnt toast, and a "fire-breathing attack llama" named Frank. After reading each other's work, the students expressed excitement and pride in our new class text, occasionally fretting over anything in their own contribution that didn't quite meet their standards of craftsmanship. Simply put, they seemed invested in their work, and in ways I didn't often see in the composition classroom.

The creativity and ownership displayed in this assignment reinforced a connection I have often seen between writer-focused (or "expressivist") ideals and multimodal composing across disciplines. For example, in my studio art practice, I have on more than one occasion heard peers explain their work and choices as a pursuit of authenticity or "being true to themselves." In the realm of comics, I've found frequent references to voice, selfhood, and process writing. To illustrate, Lynda Barry's *Syllabus: Notes From an Accidental Professor* encourages students to embark on a journey of self-discovery through drawing (see figure 2). In my own classroom, I focused on teaching applications of audience and rhetoric across modalities; yet my digital media composing students firmly maintained that they believed their assigned podcasts and video compositions were "works of art" in a way that their school-based essays were not.

In short, multimodal composing uniquely seems to encourage, in some composers, an exploration and expression of selfhood and



Figure 2: Lynda Barry invites students to draw “unselfconscious[ly]” again. (Excerpted from Barry’s *Syllabus*)

identity. I therefore hypothesize that certain multimodal assignments can teach us more about how writer-focused values can function in the contemporary composition classroom.

A few years after my high school students created their class comic book, I sought to develop a comics-focused curriculum that could support undergraduate writing instruction. In a second-year undergraduate composition course, I assigned a sequence of comics assignments, and I return to these assignments now to investigate the neo-expressivist potential of multimodal composing within the writing classroom. First, I define neo-expressivism as a contemporary movement that integrates a writer-focused approach—emphasizing such interrelated concepts as discovery, creativity, expression, identity, self, and voice—with a socially situated, audience-focused approach to writing. I then analyze student submissions on one assignment in particular—called “the Comic Conversation”—to demonstrate how classroom comics creation can inform neo-expressivist pedagogy.

## Neo-Expressivism

Although expressivism has generally fallen out of vogue within mainstream composition studies, it has gathered a handful of apologists along the way. In 1992, Stephen Fishman and Lucille Parkinson McCarthy defined expressivism as “the view that creating text involves exploring personal experience and voice” (647) and defended the scholarship of Peter Elbow in particular.

Seven years later, Wendy Bishop reminded composition scholars that expressivism has been defined by its opponents rather than its alleged disciples, with key players “cast as convenient strawmen ... slightly embarrassing advocates of a 1960s touchy-feely pedagogy” (10).

More recently, neo-expressivists continue to advocate for an unbiased reread of 1960s and ‘70s process scholars, and they extend expressivist theory and practice through contemporary lenses. Collections such as *Enculturation*’s 2012 essay cluster on “Neo-Expressivisms” and Tara Roeder and Roseanne Gatto’s 2014 anthology *Critical Expressivism* reopen dialogue on such topics as voice, personal writing, and the self—concepts that remain ingrained within our field, if widely unacknowledged. In fact, in a 2017 *CCC* article, Eli Goldblatt demonstrates how current scholarship within our field “tacitly” reflects expressivist values while maintaining a contemporary research agenda. He argues, “expressivism is not gone but woven into our present ways of understanding writers and writing” (422). In a 2019 *Composition Forum* interview, Bruce Ballenger admires Goldblatt’s argument and further suggests that expressivist pedagogy can activate writers’ motivation and encourage them to use “writing [as] a mode of learning and discovery” (n.p.). While embracing the social turn, Ballenger frames expressivist pedagogy as a starting point for students to “explore topics that matter to them *and* that potentially have social significance” (n.p., my emphasis).

Above all, neo-expressivists remind us that “the ‘social’ and ‘personal’ are not two poles in a binary system” (Roeder & Gatto, 8). Daniel Collins writes, “Expressivist writing theory, it seems to me, upholds the idea that to write is to discover oneself amidst an array of others” (125). His essay advocates for expressivist pedagogies as “embed[ding] personal discoveries in social engagement” (126). Likewise, Goldblatt identifies the “paradox of composition/rhetoric ...: writers write alone but within a charged social space shaped by contemporary culture, ethnic and erotic identities, home language, economics, power dynamics, genre and gender expectations” (443).

This contextualizing approach reminds us that to engage with such concepts as voice, identity, or personal writing can still be relevant—even crucial—after the social turn.

Neo-expressivists therefore emphasize this “both/and” approach: writing can be both personal and social; therefore, the teaching of writing can emphasize both writer and audience. In fact, in 2007 Peter Elbow returned to his conception of voice to reiterate that we should think about writing *both* in terms of metaphorical voice *and* in terms of literal “words on a page”—even if these lenses seemingly contradict one another—“because each shows us something about language that the other obscures” (175). Likewise, Stephen Fishman and Lucille McCarthy propose that the “debate between rival philosophies of composition [expressivism and social constructionism] should be redirected to consider the mixed quality of actual classroom practice.” To achieve such a “mixed” curriculum, Sheri Rysdam teaches necessary academic literacies and forms, but also “emphasize[s] the kind of low-stakes writing that [Peter] Elbow promotes...—to get familiar with and used to writing as a mode of creative and intellectual expression” (287). For Rysdam, critical expressivism does not “ignore the economic realities of the educational institution,” but still promotes writing as “a metacognitive process that allows students to think through ideas, change their minds, and think about process” (285-6). Overall, then, neo-expressivist pedagogues can embed low-stakes, writer-focused composing *within* a socially situated rhetorical curriculum.

### **“Personal or Not”: Options and Ownership**

The curriculum from my comics-themed writing course took a similar kind of “both/and” approach, integrating not only low-stakes with high-stakes composing, but also multimodal forms with more traditional academic essayist genres. I believe the visual-verbal modality of comics used throughout the course helped to remediate—literally make visible—some of the abstract writing concepts we had discussed in class. It also invited students to reflect on the affordances and constraints of different media and modalities

as they practiced rhetorical composing. Further, I hypothesize that the strong cultural and historical associations between visual modalities and fine arts disciplines implied, for at least some students, an emphasis on neo-expressivist concepts such as self, creativity, and personal style and voice.

Notably, the course curriculum that I'll describe in this article did not require "personal writing" in a strictly autobiographical sense, beyond requiring students to reflect on their writing processes. Instead, my goal was to create opportunities for students to "opt in" to more personal and creative exploration *if they wanted to*, but without offering any grade incentive for doing so or inflicting any grade penalty for not doing so.

I want to clarify here that neo-expressivist pedagogy does not demand students reveal intimate life narratives and personal trauma. In fact, I believe pushing students into revealing such content can, however paradoxically, result in the polar opposite of the authenticity some self-motivated composers seek. In her chapter "I Was a Process-Model Baby," Nancy DeJoy reflects on her experiences as a composition student, recalling, "[A] group of us figured out that the way for females to get an 'A' from this man [the instructor] was to tell stories of sexual experience—particularly stories of sexual experiences that were frightening and/or painful. The code cracked, we proceeded to meet in the hall lounge to make up stories for the teacher" (163). Admittedly, the young DeJoy in this anecdote demonstrates an expert understanding of audience by anticipating her instructor's expectations, although we can surely agree that this anecdote is problematic in many substantial ways—including, but not limited to, the instructor ignoring the power dynamic and discrepancy between instructor-prompted and writer-motivated composing.

As Peter Elbow (2015) argues, "in fact there is no such thing as 'personal writing' in itself"; instead, the topic, language, or thinking can each be "personal or not" (15). I likewise argue that scholarly writing can be personal to the writer who feels ownership over their argument and writing craft. And while we can't know

for certain whether students actually feel that their writing is personal or authentic, we can build in low-stakes opportunities for students to explore their voice—by which here I mean, the unique expression of their creative, writerly, and/or scholarly identities—if they so choose.

Yet, undergraduate writing students are early in their academic careers, and their scholarly voices are often still in development; these voices may feel to them more or less performed, personal, or authentic depending on their goals, confidence, and skill level. Therefore, one objective of neo-expressivist pedagogy can be to provide opportunities for students to become aware of and develop their own scholarly voices while demystifying the conventions and conversations of disciplinary discourse. In this article, I will examine one comic assignment in particular as a neo-expressivist activity emphasizing both the personal and social components of writing and students' emerging scholarly practice.

## Comics in the Writing Classroom

The student comics and artist statements I will discuss were created in 2017 at a large public university as part of a second-year composing class, the outcomes of which emphasized analysis and research. This class was a writing-about-literature section and satisfied a diversity requirement for students. My course theme focused on diversity portrayed in graphic narratives. Primary texts included *Asterios Polyp* (Mazzuchelli), *Maus* (Spiegelman), *Persepolis* (Satrapi), *American Born Chinese* (Yang), and *The Arrival* (Tan), as well as short texts authored by Lynda Barry, Ronald Wimberly, Chris Ware, and Alison Bechdel. Secondary texts included McCloud's *Understanding Comics* and Janet Gardner's *Reading and Writing About Literature*, along with an array of articles on comics and diversity. Over the course of the term, students wrote short essays analyzing literary texts and engaging with scholarly sources.

Students did not know course themes while choosing their section of second-year writing; therefore, they were not aware that this was a comics-focused course before the start of the term. In

the first week of class, I asked students to write a brief introductory reflection describing their comfort and experiences with comics/graphic narratives, visual analysis, and/or fiction and memoir. In a class of 23 students, 6 described themselves as having high or mid-level familiarity with comics; 5 students had encountered comics in the classroom before but still described their familiarity as low, and another 9 described their familiarity as basic (for example, limited to general awareness of newspaper comics or movie superheroes). Three students did not clearly indicate their previous familiarity with comics in an introductory reflection. Throughout their introductory reflective writings, students overall indicated curiosity and enthusiasm for the course theme.

During the semester, students supplemented their traditional analytical essays by producing low-stakes comics with accompanying reflections or “artist statements.” The sequence of comics assignments is summarized in Table 1, below.

**Table 1: Sequence of Comics Assignments**

#	Assignment	Summarized Description
1	Introductory Reflection & Character Drawing	Reflect on the course theme in 250-500 words. Then, draw yourself as a character.
2	Process Comic (with Artist Statement)	In 1-2 pages, draw a comic that conveys your composing process.
3	Comic Conversation (with Artist Statement)	In 1-2 paneled pages, create a comic that depicts you and a secondary source author having a conversation about your topic.
4	Collaborative Comic (with Artist Statement)	In your small group, create a 3-to-5-page pedagogical comic (or a mini collection of individually authored comics), teaching future students about a topic of your choice related to comics or rhetorical composing.

Table note: The character drawings in Assignment 1 were not paneled or sequenced, and therefore do not fit McCloud’s definition of comics; however, I include this assignment here because it was intended to scaffold future multimodal composing in the course, showing students that they

would occasionally be expected to produce low-stakes drawings. Assignments 2-4 also required students to turn in a 1-page reflective written component, or “artist statement,” responding to a series of generative questions on process, modality, and/or the rhetorical situation.

Above all, the objectives of these assignments matched the objectives of the course. The course taught application of rhetorical concepts, analysis, and research practices; I did not assess skills outside of the scope of the course outcomes, such as displaying artistic skill or creativity. (In other words, students received the same credit for drawing or computer-generating stick figures and simple shapes as they did for creating highly rendered or stylized cartoons.)

More specific reasons for this assignment sequence were as follows:

- **To strengthen the relationship between reading and writing.** In composition classrooms, we frequently ask students to approach texts not only as readers but as writers and as peers (hence, peer review activities). In these courses, students develop reading and writing skills as interdependent literacies. Therefore, because I was asking students to analyze graphic texts, I wanted them also to consider a creator’s perspective. Through their artist statements, students sometimes noted that they tried to apply concepts from McCloud’s *Understanding Comics* and also that they came to better understand the labor that had gone into the comics we read in class.

- **To practice reflective multimodal composing.** Comics creation provided students with an opportunity to try communicating through combined image-text. Students then reflected in their artist statements on their rhetorical choices, as well as affordances and constraints of the modality compared to alphabetic writing.

- **As writer-focused process and discovery writing for larger concepts and assignments.** Each comics assignment invited students to reflect on or apply some aspect of course content. For example, by asking students to depict their composing process, Assignment 2 encouraged students to apply class readings and

discussions of the writing process to their own lives; Assignment 4 asked them to remediate threshold course concepts into comics form. Assignment 3, to which I turn now, required them to process and clarify their own ideas in relation to others'; specifically, they were to summarize and then respond to a source they had selected for their annotated bibliography, for potential use in their upcoming research paper.

### **Assignment 3: The Comic Conversation**

The Comic Conversation prompt (included in the appendix) asked students to distinguish their own voice from that of a scholarly source they had selected. Students were required to draw themselves as a character distinct from their source author and panel out a conversation between the two. They were prompted then to reflect upon their process (including learning outcomes, challenges encountered, and comparison to their Process comic) in an accompanying artist statement.

The Comic Conversation encouraged less creativity—at least in a traditional, artistic sense of the term—than other comics assignments the students created during the course, a fact noted and even lamented by some students in their artist statements. I nevertheless identify the Comic Conversation as a neo-expressivist assignment because it encouraged students to explore certain writer-focused values in order to scaffold a larger, audience-focused project. Above all, the assignment's emphasis on scholarly identity and voice showed me how students were conceiving of their selves “amidst an array of others” (to borrow again from Daniel Collins).

By framing source integration as a conversation, this assignment implicitly emphasizes voice and distinct identity. In previous courses, I noticed that when students integrated scholarly sources into their essays, their own argument often disappeared; instead, they would merely report or summarize the source author's argument. Therefore, a primary goal for the Comic Conversation assignment was to encourage each student to envision their self and their project as distinct from that of their source author. In sum,

the assignment asked students to consider both self and others, to clarify their scholarly voice *in conversation with* other metaphorical “voices” in the field. Through this assignment, students made voice and identity “visible,” in a sense; they used speech bubbles and other visual markers to attribute unique argumentative moves, thoughts, and personal characteristics to each “character.”

## Findings

Though *voices in conversation* was emphasized in my delivery of the assignment prompt, I was surprised by the range of ways that students negotiated the constructs of voice and identity. Tasked with drawing two distinct characters, students tackled this requirement in various ways, as shown in figure 3. The majority of students chose to represent their characters as stick figures or cartoons drawn with various degrees of simplicity, stylization, or realism, often incorporating various props or settings. About a third of students chose to represent characters abstractly: some hand-drew or computer-generated a geometric shape for each character (e.g. a circle, square, or triangle), while others selected pairs of

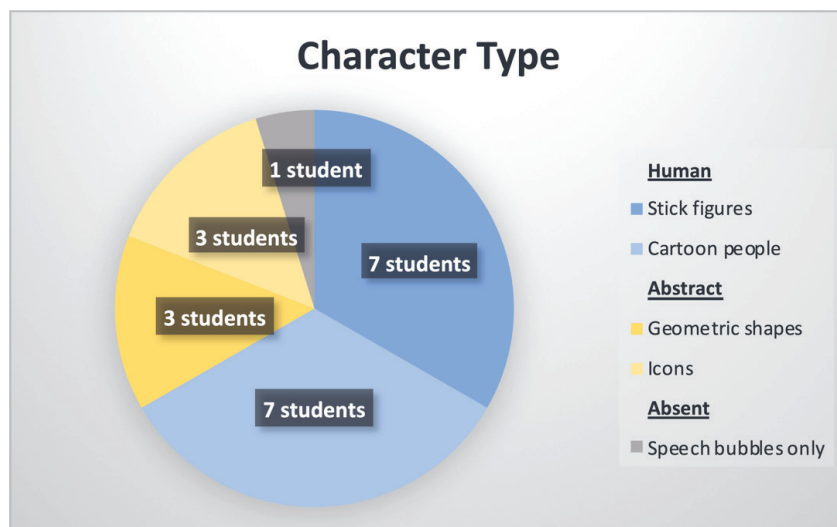


Figure 3. Breakdown of class character representation choice (human, abstract, or absent) in Assignment 3.

icons: a sun and moon; a donut and ice cream cone; or the first initial of each character's name, drawn as a bubble letter.

Most of the students who used abstract character representations did not comment upon this decision; however, one student acknowledged that her choice was "for simplicity," and another wrote that to avoid the challenge of drawing and re-drawing human characters, she simply picked something she enjoyed drawing. The remaining student did not draw embodied characters at all; instead, he identified characters only by distinct speech bubbles.

Across these responses, I was surprised to find that authenticity (or the illusion of it) seemed important to different students in different ways, especially with respect to their source author's identity. Specifically, in their reflections, a small number of students indicated their intention to represent a conversation with their author accurately. One mentioned using photo references of the author to create a stylized cartoon character. Another two noted their struggles to represent a person that they didn't know in real life. Of these, one wrote that she decided to set her comic on the author's campus, not knowing where the author spends her time otherwise; the other had chosen abstract characters but still expressed concern over creating accurate speech patterns and personality.

Students negotiated not only the portrayal of their conversation partner but of themselves. More than any written essay I have assigned, I found here that the combination of comic and artist statement taught me how students envisioned themselves as emerging scholars. Several students positioned themselves as intellectually inferior to their author. For example, in her artist statement, one student self-identified as a "nobody" who would not be having a conversation with a famous scholar in real life, adding that the assignment therefore elevated her own importance a little. Similarly, another student commented that her own opinion "usually... isn't worth that much." Yet another student pointed out how he had positioned his character on "lower ground," beneath the author's podium. The student who had drawn only speech bubbles depicted the author's text in a cloud shape and framed the

conversation as an invocation to a “sagely . . . celestial being.” While not all the relationship disparities were quite so dramatic as these, most students drew themselves asking the author for help and/or thanking their authors for their insights. Creatively, one student even drew himself as a radio talk show host interviewing his author as a guest; he asked a series of questions and ended by thanking the author on behalf of his listening audience.

Among these students who “agreed” with their author, several did so robustly, interrogating the argument at length or offering a thoughtful application to their own primary source. Finally, a small number of students ventured to assert their own voice differently—displaying skepticism, disagreeing with the author outright, qualifying an argument, or even positioning themselves as intellectual collaborators. I now offer as examples the works of two such students who creatively imagined their scholarly voice in relation to their secondary source.

## Two Case Studies of Scholarly Voice

Across seventeen submissions on this assignment, three students challenged some or all of their authors’ claims, to different ends: to dismiss the source’s usefulness, to qualify a minor point while overall agreeing, or, in TM’s<sup>3</sup> case, to build a conceptual framework for understanding competing theories. Specifically, in his comic conversation (figure 5), TM questions his source author’s explanation of secondhand trauma in Spiegelman’s *Maus*. Like a newspaper comic, this brief piece ends on a punchline: “Dr. Phil” implies experiencing his own trauma from coming under TM’s scrutiny. TM therefore uses this humor to apologize for contesting the author’s claim; however, in his accompanying artist statement, TM reveals how he uses his skepticism creatively towards developing his own argument. He writes,

*This [comic] helped me determine that the interpretations of the some of the elements of trauma are up for debate. While it is widely understood that Artie [the protagonist of Maus] went through*

some unfortunate experiences . . . **the text is inconclusive** as to whether this is a result of being raised in a household in which both parents experienced an extremely traumatic adulthood, or whether they were caused by some variable independent of the Holocaust. (my emphasis)

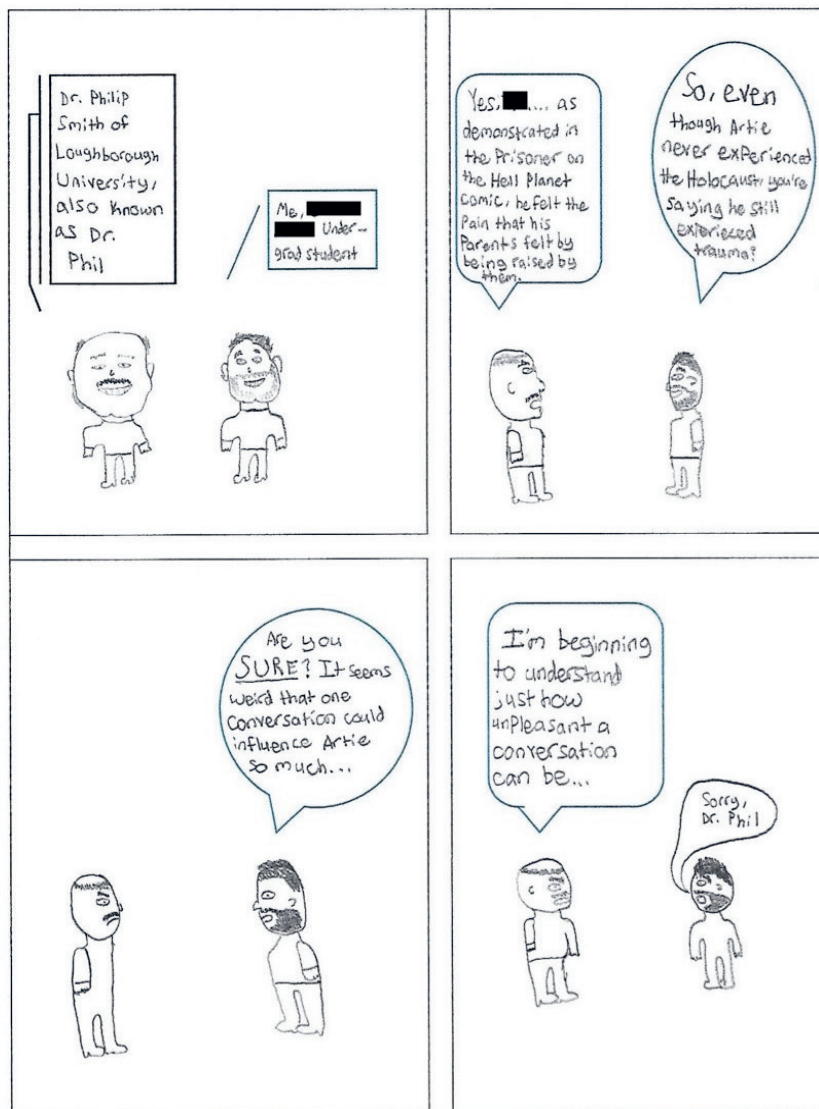


Figure 5. TM's Comic Conversation, with identifying information (student name and institution) redacted. Reproduced with permission.

In other words, rather than dismiss Dr. Phil's argument and select a new source, TM positions his author's voice as part of a larger conversation, or one of several potential explanations.<sup>4</sup>

While most students agreed with their authors, only one author was imagined as agreeing *with the student*; uniquely, ST placed herself on equal intellectual footing with her author. Her simple stick-figured comic, reproduced in figure 6, demonstrates sophisticated scholarly collaboration: Throughout the conversation, ST and her author both compliment each other's ideas as "interesting" and "neat," and they build upon those ideas to flesh out Yang's complex use of stereotyping in *American Born Chinese*. In her artist statement, ST compares her work in this comic to her previous "surface level" analyses of secondary sources:

*In the past ... I would take the ideas mentioned in the source, quote them, rephrase them in my own words, and then use the exact idea to apply to whatever I wanted to say in the text. Through the conversation comic, I had to think of another way to make the ideas mentioned in the source my own ideas — rephrasing wouldn't cut it. ... **The biggest challenges for me included coming up with the author's main point, adding my own voice, and structuring my comic. ... [E]xpanding upon the text was not as easy as I thought it'd be. I really had to think about how this text contributed to my own ideas and create a direct connection.** (my emphasis)*

This artist statement suggests that ST took seriously the exigence for this comic, critically reflecting not only on the author's main point, but also on what it would look like to establish one's scholarly voice in conversation. She used the assignment as an opportunity to reflect upon her own experiences, strategies, and textual ownership as a writer.

TM and ST's comics were two exceptional explorations of emerging scholarly voice, and their strategies (skepticism and collaboration, respectively) varied distinctly; and, I suspect,



Figure 6. ST's Comic Conversation. Reproduced with permission.

continued to shift and develop throughout their academic careers beyond my classroom. By building different relationships, these two comics demonstrate the “both/and” approach of neo-expressivist pedagogy; students are given room to “authentically” pursue their own ideas (rather than simply accepting and restating the author’s argument) while negotiating a nascent scholarly identity. In sum, to be able to position themselves within academic discourse, these students must simultaneously consider both self and others, a summation of neo-expressivist goals.

## Opportunities in the Neo-Expressivist Classroom

To offer a neo-expressivist writing curriculum is to build in opportunities for students to consider themselves as writers and composers—to reflect on and explore their own identities. As a whole, the class seemed to use this low-stakes, multimodal assignment as composing for process and discovery. Students overwhelmingly articulated that they had made new connections or realizations as

a result of the assignment. More than half of students indicated in their artist statements that they better understood their chosen source as a result of the exercise, read their source in a different way than they otherwise would have, and/or better understood how and why we engage with research in writing. Almost two thirds of students indicated that they had discovered more about their own argument through this exercise: clarifying, narrowing, or shifting their working thesis for their final assignment.

While most students indicated *discovery* as an assignment outcome, it is important to note that certain students may be more or less invested in pursuing writer-focused values in each assignment. Therefore, *option* and *opportunity* are foundational to neo-expressivist pedagogy. For example, in this particular assignment, I do wish that I had *allowed for* (though not required) greater artistic creativity. I had expected some students to be intimidated by the prospect of drawing during the course, and I therefore intended to make this particular task a bit easier for them by offering a panel template for this assignment. Yet, unexpectedly, a small number of students found the templated structure in itself to be a challenge: they indicated that they had hoped this multimodal assignment would allow greater opportunity for artistic creativity, or that they struggled to incorporate their own personal style in a way that satisfied them. These responses again suggest an implicit association between multimodal composing and writer-focused values, and they serve to remind us that individual writers have varied motivations, needs, and concerns.

Thus, neo-expressivism is not about imposing certain genres of “personal” writing assignments on our students. Instead, a neo-expressivist classroom recognizes that students have and are developing individually unique identities, skills, values, and arguments; therefore, it offers intentional opportunities for students to opt in and opt out of exploring writing-centered values as they navigate new discourse communities. Comics creation is one avenue for that exploration, allowing students to remediate and make visible their own values and voice.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>For more information, see Williams's *The Non-Designer's Design Book*.

<sup>2</sup>Regrettably, I do not have permission to share these student-authored comics.

<sup>3</sup>I have used initials in lieu of names to protect student privacy.

<sup>4</sup>Note: Another reminder that students are encountering new ideas and shaping their scholarly voices over time: By the time he wrote his final paper, TM seemed to have become more open to the idea of secondhand trauma; although he did not use this secondary source in his final paper, he integrated other sources that used similar theory.

<sup>5</sup>I did not conceive of this activity on my own; the assignment was "department lore" in my graduate program, and the original creator of the concept remains unknown to me. This version of my prompt was adapted from my colleague's, Dr. Emily Corey, version of the assignment.

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## Appendix: Comic Conversation Prompt<sup>5</sup>

**Objectives:** Through this assignment, students will:

- Summarize a scholarly argument
- Establish their own academic voice by entering into conversation with a secondary source
- Sequence the delivery of information
- Reflect on research and composing practices
- Practice multimodal composing

### Tasks:

Part 1: Comic. In 1-2 paneled pages, draw a comic that depicts you and an argument source author having a conversation about your exhibit source. Your comic must include "yourself" as a character, although you may represent yourself however you choose!

This comic is sequenced as a dialogue. Therefore, (1) your source author must summarize his/her main or relevant point(s) and (2) your character must respond. Question, qualify, extend, negate, complicate, or apply your author's argument. Engage with your author at least twice (e.g., author speaks, student speaks, author speaks, student speaks) to create a conversation. Make sure

also to make an explicit connection to your exhibit/paper topic.

You must convey a paneled dialogue between your author and your own character; how you choose to do it is up to you!

Part 2: Reflective Artist Statement. In an accompanying 1-page artist statement, reflect on the experience of imagining yourself in direct conversation with your source author. What did you learn from it? What was challenging? How did it affect your thinking about or approach to your source? With remaining space, you are welcome to reflect on how your experience of creating this comic differed from creating the Process Comic.

**Criteria:** A successful comic and reflective artist statement will:

- Meet the 1-2 page requirement
- Sequence images and/or words to summarize and enter into conversation with a scholarly source
- Present each character as speaking/contributing at least twice to convey a conversation
- Make an explicit connection to the student's paper topic
- Reflect upon new research processes.

# PUTTING GRAMMAR IN (ITS) PLACE! WHAT, WHEN, AND IN WHAT ORDER— A PLANNING TOOL-KIT

Paul Morris

“I have a choice what to teach, so I’m always concerned I’ve left something important out.” “I don’t know the scope and sequence.” “We are struggling with relevancy.” These comments were made by teacher-participants I surveyed at a workshop on applied grammar, but they reflect a general concern voiced by secondary instructors and student teachers I work with as an English Education instructor. I have led the week-long summer workshop annually for four years on behalf of the Bay Area branch of the National Writing Project (N.W.P.), and, in response to participants’ feedback, I have increasingly focused not just on teaching grammar, but on *planning* for grammar. Teachers want coherent answers to questions related to long-term design: which topics to prioritize? When to teach them? In what order? And how to integrate these topics with existing curricula? In response, I have assembled a set of planning guidelines designed to help secondary instructors implement grammar across the academic year; these coordinates allow teachers to orchestrate plans according to an overarching logic, while being sufficiently flexible to apply to a wide variety of teaching situations and student populations. Without a far-sighted, coherent vision, it can be hard to see the grammar forest for the trees; instructors can be overwhelmed by an apparent clutter of labels, rules, and conventions, and excursions into grammar tend to be guided by thinking more wishful than joined-up. This problem is illustrated

by the fact that participants arrive at the workshop knowing not to target every error on a student paper but are generally less sure about which errors to emphasize and when to teach them. By the workshop's end, teachers are able to apply the planning criteria in order to select, sequence, and schedule grammar topics across the year, as well as embed them into their existing curricula. It is this planning "tool-kit" that is the focus of this article.

While teachers I work with sense that a little grammar, at the right time, can go a long way, they frequently lack the confidence to teach it. They can be confused about how to integrate it and uncertain of what constitutes "enough," as articulated by a teacher, whom I shall call Loretta, at the start of a recent workshop:

My school and district OFTEN say grammar must be embedded in context, but RARELY provide models or support for how to embed it. Then, when I or other teachers try, the administration says, "You're teaching too much grammar," without giving alternative suggestions, or truly looking deeply at what the teachers or I are doing. Grammar is a sensitive topic, perhaps rightly so, since some old-fashioned styles of teaching are known to be deleterious to students. However, administrators are now triggered by the word "grammar" even though they know it's crucial and want it to be taught more.

At the root of this predicament lies a tension between two pedagogical imperatives, framed by Richard Hudson as a question: "Can grammar teaching be both contextual and systematic?" (103). Hudson notes that if teachers try to avoid isolated instruction and respond to grammar in context, as it arises, "the right moment' ... may never come" (103). For teachers, paralyzed by conflicting pressures, it can be tempting to brush off grammar instruction altogether. As one teacher-participant candidly put it, "[Grammar] always gets pushed off—it's easy to move to the next day." This seemingly endless deferral underlies Martha Kolln's premise, stated

in a letter to *English Journal*, that we have effectively “denied the study of grammar a place in the K–12 curriculum” by sacrificing “systematic study” to the principle of teaching in “context” (12-13).

Addressing the conundrum head-on, at recent workshops we unpack what it means to be systematic and expand our notion of what it means to be contextual. We are then able to construct organizational frameworks that support our ability to plan for grammar according to consistent logic. In the section that follows, I briefly describe the key theoretical principles that support a systematic approach to planning, one that can empower teachers like Loretta to take a proactive approach to grammar rather than a predominantly reactive one. I set out the workshop’s rationale for teaching grammar and I describe how theories related to transfer of learning and the pedagogical principle of deliberate practice can help instructors implement a grammar curriculum that is coherent, integrated, and systematic.

## **Approaching Grammar Planning Systematically: Theoretical Overview**

So how do we enable a systematic approach to grammar? At the workshop, we make a number of inter-related pedagogical moves. First, we prioritize writing as the focal point of planning; the litmus test for any grammar plan is whether it actually improves students’ written work (i.e., their papers). Second, recognizing that grammar is a loaded, multifaceted term, we define our territory. The workshop’s main concern is students’ ability to construct, control, and vary the grammatical unit that is the written sentence—close in spirit to Patrick Hartwell’s grammar as style. Effective syntax can sharpen the focus of a sentence, signal emphasis, and show (and create) relationships between ideas. We choose our topics wisely, cherry-picking those with most impact on students’ ability to make and shape meaning through syntax. Third, we identify models for organizing daily lessons so that learning opportunities can be sequenced systematically and followed-through to logical conclusions, regardless of the specifics of classroom materials.

Fourth, for lesson design and for year-long curriculum planning, we draw on principles that support long-term transfer of learning, that is, those geared to helping students internalize and retain structures so that they can apply them independently to future, unfamiliar writing situations.

Although research on transfer is somewhat mixed, there are a number of conclusions that point towards improved retention and ongoing application of writing skills. The online *Elon Statement on Writing Transfer* highlights the importance of having students write “within specific contexts” that help students’ perceive how writing skills can apply to real rhetorical situations, using “rhetorically-based concepts” such as “genre, purpose, and audience.” During the workshop, we explore multiple ways that grammar can be embedded within socio-rhetorical contexts, but our most important move is to align particular grammatical features with the most rhetorically-appropriate writing. We do this by noting which structures are likely to feature in a given genre (e.g., verbal phrases and narrative writing). In this way, teachers can plan for such tie-ins across the curriculum, anticipating the optimal grammatical fit for any given assignment and reinforcing conditions supportive of transfer in which students “transform rhetorical awareness into performance” (*Elon Statement*). Instead of being primarily reactive, instructors can anticipate the most relevant rhetorical contexts to highlight grammatical skills.

Planning for this rhetorical alignment is made easier by the fact that we draw up a shortlist of grammar topics most relevant to our primary focus, effective sentence building. At the workshop, teachers learn to distinguish between more “surface” concerns which have minimal impact on how sentences are put together (such as the apostrophe) and more “serious” concerns which are intrinsic to sentence craft and impact how ideas are expressed. The sentence-level skills we place at the top of this hierarchy include the following: the sentence fundamentals of subjects and verbs; clause and phrase structures, and sentence complexity; and punctuation to signal relations between clauses, phrases, and sentences. Teachers are able

to prioritize concepts they will teach across the year and map them on to writing assignments. This is not to imply that mechanics do not matter; however, establishing hierarchies helps define our scope and make the grammar forest more navigable.

Adding to the rhetorical emphasis, we compile a list of other, more minor tweaks to the curriculum that can deepen socio-rhetorical, meaning-related contexts for learning, such as scheduling mini-lessons with the proofreading stage of assignments to accentuate the impact of grammar on performance. The checklist appears later in the article.

Since pedagogical method has bearing on the way that topics can be organized, it is worth briefly rehearsing the workshop's underlying principles. The mood music consists of socio-constructivist and inquiry-based learning, with an emphasis on showing and doing over lengthy explanations. In keeping with a focus on *applied* grammar, procedural knowledge of how to use grammar, such as composing a complex sentence, takes precedent over declarative knowledge of how to name grammar, such as traditional sentence parsing. This is not to say that explicit knowledge has no role in the internalization of new grammar skills—more that it relies on a particular kind of knowing, intimately connected to the learner's ability to apply what they learn. In this regard, the cognitive theory of deliberate practice (Kellogg and Whiteford) is particularly useful. It shows how, as teachers, we can create opportunities for students to simultaneously channel both attention and practice towards a target skill with an emphasis on how to use the skill until it becomes relatively “automatic and effortless” (251). In relation to grammar, this mental collaboration can be achieved by using sentence-manipulation techniques that help students to notice a structure—raising their conscious attention—at the same time as they experiment with it.

Heightening students' attention can support the development of meta-awareness, which, according to the *Elon Statement*, “often plays a key role in transfer,” a principle supported by multiple studies (e.g., Billing; Wardle; Perkins and Salomon). Importantly, according to David Billing, metacognition of procedural skills and the ways they

can be applied can support the development of “flexible schemata” that can help learners transfer the skills to “dissimilar problems” beyond the immediate context (509). With reference to grammar, a degree of metacognition can help students abstract their knowledge of skills and how they can be used in writing in order to apply them to different, unfamiliar writing situations; this is what David Perkins and Gavriel Salomon call “high road” transfer (7), a point developed by Nelson Graff in the context of secondary education settings:

Helping students make their knowledge of grammar explicit, however, enables them to make more conscious and strategic choices about language use. . . . For high-road transfer, students need to learn the explicit procedural and conditional knowledge that will help them decide which skills to apply to problems in new situations. (3)

According to this principle, metacognitive awareness of grammar procedures and how they connect to rhetorical choices can promote the development of more flexible thinking (“conditional knowledge”), helping students to more consciously vary the rhythms of their sentence structures according to purpose and occasion. In short, situating grammar skills in rhetorical context is said to be supportive of transfer, but at least equally important is students’ ability to decontextualize these skills through reflection and metacognition in order to support application to new, different settings (Billing 488).

In the rest of this article, I describe in more depth the criteria we use to make planning decisions. Drawing on my work with the N.W.P. specifically and my role as Coordinator of English Education at San Francisco State University where I prepare future secondary educators, I start with the business of day-to-day lessons, including how to address error in student writing, since lesson design contributes to the bigger organizational picture, and vice versa. I then describe ways to contextualize grammar by making relatively minor adjustments to the curriculum and the spirit in which it is

delivered before I finally turn to the main focus: year-long curricula design. Conscious that English Language Arts teachers shoulder many competing demands, the workshop is guided by the mantra of minimal grammar for maximum gain. The workshop culminates with teachers working in grade-levels on grammar year plans in which grammar is integrated with their existing curricula and tailored for their student populations. I conclude by sharing four of these outlines as models for how teachers can apply the planning tool-kit.

## “Avoiding the Rabbit Holes:”

### Balancing Doing and Knowing

To zero-in on the logistics of planning, I start the workshop by asking two deceptively simple questions: “Why teach grammar?” and “What does it mean to *know* grammar?” Pondering the first question makes clear a central tenet of the workshop: the only instruction that matters is that which can be shown to improve student writing. Furthermore, this wholly practical benchmark—to produce better writing—can be measured in two ways, end-points which sharpen the overall focus of planning, providing purpose and direction: to improve *sentence correctness* (to avoid, detect, and correct errors) or to advance *sentence power* (to vary sentences for stylistic effect). The second question (“What does it mean to *know* grammar?”) speaks to an important distinction between different ways of knowing: knowing in the sense of “defining and naming,” associated with traditional schoolbook grammar, and knowing that is more practicable and use-oriented, likely to carry over to writing and to help students internalize forms or notice and correct errors. This tension between two kinds of knowing, the first that is primarily declarative, the second that works to raise awareness in support of procedural skills, is articulated by two workshop participants whom I surveyed; one writes that she frets over, “Spending too much time on details and not getting a sense that students ever *really* get it,” and the other queries, “How to realistically expect ... instruction to transfer to writing?” About half of the participants tend to have

some previous experience teaching grammar; of these, most tend to the “naming of parts” variety, with—in their own words—seemingly negligible impact on students’ actual writing.

To best support the development of procedural skills and their transfer to writing, it helps to understand something of how the brain processes applied knowledge. A model of learning that sheds light on this is called “controlled processing” (Maybery and Speelman 84). This theory puts two cognitive states in synergy, one that is largely unconscious and another that is governed by a “conscious intention to learn” (Wynne 257). Essentially, internalization of a new skill is supported by balancing *doing* and *knowing*. Over-reliance on one or the other presents problems—exposure alone is frequently insufficient as is an over-emphasis on explanation. This dual approach is reflected in the way many of us learn to drive a car; rather than learn about motor vehicles in the abstract, with an emphasis on declarative knowledge (e.g., naming the parts of the engine), we take a car on an empty road in order to isolate key maneuvers (e.g., clutch control in a manual car), targeting practice and focusing attention simultaneously—doing and knowing in a reciprocal relationship. Furthermore, targeting skills in a safe environment allows the learner to take risks, supported by the instructor’s immediate feedback.

Thinking about grammar from a functional perspective helps instructors to reconceptualize how they plan for and assess student learning, ultimately shifting the pedagogical tone of their teaching from knowing-what to knowing-how. The symbiotic cognitive states of controlled processing can be activated by creating opportunities for deliberate practice (Kellogg and Whiteford), exercises which funnel both hands-on experimentation and mindfulness onto a single skill (e.g., use of verbal phrases). Examples of deliberate practice for grammar include exercises in manipulating syntax such as sentence imitation and sentence combining, both of which can be found in Don Killgallon’s workbooks on sentence composing; I also provide examples of both in the Appendix. Ronald Kellogg and Alison Whiteford single-out sentence combining for the role it can

play in “training students to produce complex sentences,” because such sentences, “place the greatest demands on working memory,” and therefore, “benefit from deliberate practice” (257). In the ways they channel procedural thinking related to the manipulation and generation of syntactic structures, sentence combining and sentence imitation approximate the kind of problem-solving skills writers use when composing actual sentences.

Deliberate practice in manipulating syntax raises students’ consciousness as they experiment with form—a delicate dance between knowing and doing. As students experience a form in isolation, singled-out for rehearsal, their conscious attention of this form is heightened. Teachers can build on this sense of focus, fine-tuning the degree of explicit instruction in response to student performance; explanations can arise as needed in the light of students’ approximations, adding to their existing, but frequently latent, grammar know-how and tilting the balance towards internalization. Furthermore, this explicit attention is grounded in concrete examples, tied to what a structure *does* to a sentence and its effect on meaning, helping to sidestep, in the words of one participant, the “rabbit holes” of overly-abstract and seemingly endless explanations. Applied grammar is geared towards performance rather than definitional exactitude, and noticing and naming are a means to this end rather than an end in themselves. The goal is to build on what students can (already) do and to add just enough explicit instruction—modeling, explaining, clarifying—to nudge students in the right direction. With this sense of “knowing” (or, perhaps better, “know-how”) in mind, instructors can ask the following questions when designing in the spirit of applied grammar:

- Is the thrust of teaching and learning toward application—i.e., students’ writing?
- Is the emphasis of instruction on procedural skills rather than declarative knowledge? Is “knowing” in the service of application and retention rather than an end in itself?
- Would students benefit from deliberate practice to “test

drive” new structures or rules (e.g., sentence imitation and sentence combining)?

- Are explanations grounded in concrete examples, such as students’ own sentence manipulation workouts?
- Are explanations just enough, too little, or too much? Is the degree of explicit explanation likely to support or interfere with learning?

With the underlying pedagogical principles of the workshop established, I turn to the logistics of reifying such an ethos within fully developed, systematic lessons.

### **Lesson Planning Tool #1: Logical Lesson Design**

Having clear, consistent principles for organizing grammar lessons—regardless of the choice of activities—allows instructors to identify any gaps in their plans that might hinder students’ internalization of new skills. During the N.W.P. workshop, we identify two models of lesson design that promote systematic sequencing and act as touchstones to evaluate daily planning: the gradual-release-of-responsibility model (Fisher and Frey 3) and inquiry-based instruction. In practice, teachers frequently blend these models, breaking down learning into manageable steps but also encouraging inductive exploration and discovery.

A gradual-release of responsibility model is showcased in Roberta Ching’s text-based grammar modules that support the California Expository Reading and Writing Curriculum (E.R.W.C.). I frequently use Ching’s curriculum as a reference point for grammar planning because I have been involved in training teachers within the E.R.W.C. ecosystem and because it provides complex teaching strategies in an elegant design, with clear, logical sequencing of scaffolds. Each grammar module complements one of the main reading and writing modules, and proceeds from a teacher-led mini-lesson of a form or rule through group activities and individual practice to application to students’ writing. Activities grow in complexity and scaffolds are progressively removed so that

students take responsibility for transferring the target skill to their writing. Learning mainly takes place in class time, creating ongoing opportunities for peer- and self-assessment and for immediate feedback.

In order to foreground the organizational logic, below I extract the most essential steps included in the grammar modules:

- Modules start with a “guided composition” activity to highlight a rule (e.g., complete versus incomplete sentences) or form (e.g., adjective clauses) in the context of a current class reading. The instructor reads aloud a short excerpt cherry-picked from the corresponding module’s main reading, while students listen carefully; the teacher reads aloud for a second time and students take notes without access to the original text. As an optional scaffold, students might also share their notes in small groups. Finally, students attempt to reproduce the passage using their notes, trying to match the original syntax as best they can. The instructor collects the excerpts as formative assessment. This opening activity contextualizes the target structure in a class reading and encourages students to think about it by first hearing it and then attempting to transcribe it.
- The instructor shows an overhead projection of four or so isolated examples of the target feature (e.g., sentences demonstrating use of specific verb tenses), taken from the same excerpt, inviting students to discuss what they notice. Sometimes examples are doctored to highlight the structure or rule and sometimes incorrect versions are placed alongside correct versions for contrast (e.g., complete sentences versus fragments). By isolating and contrasting the structure, the teacher is able to further raise students’ attention.
- The instructor builds on students’ consciousness by explaining the feature and how it works, including any

appropriate definitions (e.g., defining subjects, verbs, and the grammatically complete sentence).

- Students perform a series of identification exercises, in which they underline the feature(s) (e.g., subjects and verbs) in individual sentences before progressing to whole passages (e.g., a paragraph or two), each sample taken from the main readings or from anonymous (past) student samples. The identification activities can act as a powerful tool in further helping students to notice the structure and how it works in sentences, enabling them to perceive patterns and variations for themselves.
- Students use deliberate practice to experience using the feature, including such activities as: sentence combining (e.g., adjective clauses), fill-in-the-blanks (e.g., appropriate verb tenses), or correction exercises (e.g., editing run-on sentences). Exercises proceed from isolated sentences to short excerpts (e.g., a paragraph or two) and are again drawn from the work of students or from current readings, thus once more contextualizing grammar in real writing (a point to which I will return when discussing context).
- In the final stage, the instructor again shows the original guided composition excerpt on an overhead and puts it alongside one of the students' samples, sparking discussion about any differences in syntactic choice and the possible implications for meaning. The overhead is removed and students re-edit their original attempt in order to be as close to the actual passage as they can, further deepening their awareness. Students then target the structure or rule when editing their current papers; it is this application of the skill to their papers that will be used to assess students' learning.

By culminating in application to students' current compositions, Ching's curriculum is designed to help students become "independent editors of their own writing" (xv). This

emphasis on applicability represents an opportunity to “transform rhetorical knowledge ... into performance” (*Elon Statement*) in order to reinforce long-term retention of skills. Students’ consciousness of the target skill is bolstered by Ching’s emphasis on teaching—rather than assigning—proofreading. Students follow a number of steps that support their ability to edit their writing, with emphasis on the target structure:

- Students choose to concentrate on the whole or part of their paper to proofread.
- They underline the target feature.
- They make corrections to the target feature, placing a question mark next to anything they are unsure of.
- Next, they exchange papers and consult with a peer about their queries.
- Finally, for unresolved issues, they can call-in the instructor for help.

Besides focusing students’ attention through a set of well-defined steps, with a degree of differentiated choice, the protocol also creates windows for the class to share, discuss, and practice proofreading techniques (e.g., slowing down, reading aloud, putting a finger under each word) that can help students become more mindful self-readers, better able to notice and address sentence-level issues.

Ching’s template is flexible; students’ guided compositions are used diagnostically to shape instruction, and scaffolds are modified, revisited, or removed in response to ongoing formative assessment derived from the activities. The modules provide a template of what a fully-fledged gradual-release-of-responsibility design might look like, helping instructors to calibrate their own planning and visualize potential gaps in logic, as well as alternative sequencing and possible next steps. In the workshop, teachers try out the identification exercises (e.g., underlying verbal phrase structures in sentences) and deliberate practice exercises (e.g., combining sentences using verbal phrases), noting how the activities work in

tandem to raise awareness of structural patterns and variations. While Ching's template provides a reassuring sense of direction, instructors consider what a slimmed down sequence might look like, particularly given the demands on time; in the workshop, we discuss the possibility of frontloading the hands-on components—such as the identification exercise and deliberate practice—and holding much of the teacher-led mini-lesson, explanations, and definitions in reserve, in effect emphasizing the more inquiry elements that can be built-upon as needed.

Turning to inquiry-based sequences, the pedagogical emphasis is on student rather than teacher explanation, with explanations proceeding from—rather than preceding—students' hands-on practice. Commonly, sequences begin by summoning students' prior knowledge and progress through problem-solving activities and deliberate practice towards collective understanding. According to the *Elon Statement*, “conscious reflection on prior knowledge and adaptation of it for new contexts and purposes” may work in the service of transfer, preparing students to draw on this knowledge as they problem-solve different writing situations. A common inquiry sequence involves “guided noticing,” in which students extract a rule from analyzing multiple examples. To teach speech punctuation, for example, Linda Christensen copies relevant pages from a class reading and asks groups to discover the rules and provide an example for each. She initially guides the students by providing clues about where to look (e.g., the position of the quotation marks); she has them highlight relevant conventions and punctuation (e.g., the placing of capital letters and commas), name the rules they discover, and put these rules—along with examples of each—on group posters. Once posters have been checked, they can be put on the classroom walls or the instructor can create a reference sheet as a handout (266). Typically, an inquiry sequence ends with direct application to writing—for instance, in this case, students might be asked to produce a low-stakes piece that incorporates two characters talking, demonstrating their knowledge of speech punctuation.

In a second inquiry-oriented sequence, Killgallon's sentence composing workouts make use of contrast to hook students and to stimulate inductive thinking. Modules begin by showing students a list of sentences, first without, then with the target structure (e.g., adjective clauses). The hook takes students through a number of steps, tweaked a little here to highlight its full inquiry potential:

1. Students identify the structure:
  - a. Teacher shows sentences without the structure.
  - b. Teacher shows the same sentences with the structure (students can highlight the difference).
2. Students describe the structure, answering questions like: "What does it look like?" "What are its features?" "What does it do for the sentence?" And "Where can it (best) be used:
  - a. as a sentence opener?
  - b. in a subject-verb split?
  - c. as a sentence closer?"

In this model, students are invited to discover a structure within a syntactic context, noting its characteristics, its function, even its position within a sentence, with the potential to discuss its effect on meaning. After this exercise in noticing and naming, each module proceeds through a series of sentence manipulation exercises (e.g., sentence imitation and sentence combining), reinforcing students' consciousness as they play with form.

From these examples, teachers gain a sense of how an inquiry sequence might unfold. First, students are invited to notice the relevant form(s) (e.g., through isolation, contrast, studying models) and reflect on what they already know, then identify and describe in their own words, then perform a number of deliberate practice exercises, and, finally, apply to writing. Students' problem-solving acts as a conduit for more conscious awareness that the instructor can nurture as needed to promote internalization.

Referencing these organizational frameworks means instructors

can make more informed decisions about lesson planning, able to re-see and fine-tune their own designs: how they might begin and end sequences; where they might provide extra support; where they might try a more inductive approach, and so on. In place of wishful thinking—providing an explanation and hoping students will “get it”—instructors have logical pathways to promote student learning. The prompts below help teachers test the logic of their own designs and whether they are organized to optimize application and retention:

- Which will work best for my student(s): a gradual-release-of-responsibility model, an inquiry-based method, or a blend? Are there any gaps in my sequence where additional support might help students internalize a feature? For example, if students are not transferring a structure to writing, perhaps targeted proofreading and/or teacher think-aloud modeling of how to apply it during writing would help students make the bridge between practice and performance—the *Elon Statement* recommends explicit modeling of “transfer-focused thinking and the application of metacognitive awareness,” as an enabling practice for long-term transfer.
- Do I start with the students—have I solicited what they already know and diagnosed their needs? Am I formatively assessing?
- Does proofreading take place in class? Is it scaffolded? Targeted?
- Have I made a direct bridge to student writing—is application the end-point?

## **Lesson Planning Tool #2: Assessing and Responding to Error—Logically**

Once student papers have been collected, it helps to know how to diagnose and address errors in a systematic way. In the workshop, we draw on William Robinson’s summary of error-analysis (54-5) to identify four potential sources of error:

- *Process-based errors*: these are mistakes or slip-ups that can stem from how thoroughly someone has internalized a skill or from the relative demands of the writing task (e.g., more likely with on-demand or timed writing); a logical response is to focus on proofreading strategies and to set targets with individual students.
- *Knowledge-based errors*: these are errors arising from lack of knowledge; a reasonable response is for instructors to hold back commenting until they have taught the form or rule and students possess sufficient awareness to act on the feedback.
- *Dialectical variations and linguistic echoes from other languages*: teachers need to be sensitive to students' sociolinguistic backgrounds and support language variety with a diverse curriculum and by raising awareness of the validity of all varieties.

As part of the workshop, we discuss the role of code-switching techniques popular with teachers (Delpit; Wheeler and Swords), as well as more recent critiques of these methods. According to Lisa Delpit, code-switching is an additive-based approach to language that gives all students access to the “codes of power,” (24); however, it should be delivered alongside critical framing of the “arbitrariness” of codes and their power-relationships (45). We draw on the ideas of English teacher Judith Baker who has her students create informal linguistic ethnographies of the varieties they use (e.g., at home, at work, at hobby), encouraging students to own the language choices they make and frame them in relation to issues around identity and justice. In relation to language justice, we discuss current challenges to code-switching. Compositionist Vershawn Ashanti Young argues for an alternative to the dualistic code-switching model, calling for “code-meshing,” a more expansive view of academic language

that validates students' blended languages; sociolinguists Nelson Flores and Jonathan Rosa explore social bias around language, problematizing notions of correctness and appropriateness to contest the "racial status quo" (169).

Although the specific needs of English Language Learners lie outside the scope of this article, a resource we reference in the workshop in relation to error-analysis is Douglas Fisher et al.'s "Examples of Transfer from Primary Language Structures" (70), a guide to the kind of linguistic patterns that learners might carry over from other languages (e.g., lack of indefinite articles).

- *Developmental errors*: these spring from risk and experimentation; for example, recurring sentence fragments might be a result of students trying out more complex sentence structures, such as subordinate clauses; comma-splices might indicate a readiness to learn new forms such as the semi-colon or phrasal structures to link sentences closely-related in meaning. Such errors can also occur as result of oral interference or perhaps as process errors—sometimes conferencing with individual students or listening to what they can correct under optimal proofreading conditions can help clarify the source of an error-pattern.

A systematic approach to error is non-judgmental and recognizes mistakes as a natural part of learning. Revealingly, one workshop participant reflected on an error-pattern that had recently emerged in the writing of one of his students, sharing how a misconception of the error had negatively affected his feedback to the student. The sudden appearance of "dangling modifiers" had been perceived by the instructor solely in terms of deficits to be avoided, embodied in his liberal use of red-ink; he now recognized the error as likely arising from the student's willingness to experiment with verbal phrases, thus representing an opportunity to reward the risk-taking and teach the relevant

structure. Rather than police correctness, teachers can invite students into conversations about error. For example, teachers can encourage students to set personal targets from an error sheet (a menu of common errors) and use the sheet to chart their own progress across papers.

We consider other factors when weighing-up how to respond to errors. While teachers commonly prioritize errors that interfere with students' intended meaning, we balance this consideration alongside other factors such as students' readiness to learn a particular form or rule and the relative "seriousness" of an error. We discuss how surface errors (e.g., around the use of the apostrophe) are essentially "closed" in nature, reliant on fixed rules, and thus more akin to spelling; more serious errors are "open" in that they depend on some kind of choice or decision, tending to impact the architecture of the sentence and weigh on meaning. In this regard, we rate the following as the more serious: the role of subjects and verbs and how they relate; verb tense; clause and phrase structures; sentence boundaries. In contrast with surface mechanics, which have finite rules, the only limit on sentence formation is the writer's syntactic repertoire. Pat Cordeiro makes a similar case for punctuation, which, unlike "closed capacity" skills such as spelling and capitalization, cannot be "routinized" or "learnable in a single, final form," but is "forever open to negotiation" and a part of a writer's meaning-making process (59-60).

Which error to attack and when to tackle it is a judgment call, but it is possible to make informed decisions. The chart in Figure 1 lists a series of prompts designed to assist instructors in weighing their response to error while wearing two hats: a "reader" hat and a "teacher" hat. The former recognizes students' roles as communicators and is sensitive to the fact that "real" readers can be critical, albeit sometimes unfairly; the latter recognizes students as learners and posits learning as an ongoing, developmental process, requiring continuing support, time, and pedagogical nuance.

Responding as a Reader	Responding as a Teacher
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Which errors get in the way of reading?</li> <li>• Which errors are likely to bother readers?</li> <li>• Are they worth devoting (much) time to? Are they surface? Usage? A “one-off” or part of a bigger pattern?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does an error occur frequently? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is it likely to recur in future papers?</li> <li>• How “serious” is it?</li> <li>• What is its likely source?</li> <li>• Is there any evidence the student can apply the form or follow the rule?</li> <li>• Does it violate a rule I can explain readily?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• When is the best occasion to address this error—do I respond now or make a teacher’s note? Have we addressed this error previously? Do I intend to address it with the class at some point?</li> <li>• Which error is the student most interested in or ready to address?</li> <li>• Did the student (or I) set specific targets?</li> </ul>

Figure 1: Responding to Error as a Reader, Responding as a Teacher

To help students address errors in their writing, Ching’s proofreading steps represent a valuable template, and such steps can be augmented with specific strategies designed to help students perceive and correct—or “find and fix”—errors related to sentence control issues, comma-splices and sentence fragments:

For comma-splices:

- First circle all commas.
- See whether a complete sentence follows the comma.

- If it does, see whether another complete sentence precedes the comma.
- If it does, there is a run-on sentence error present.

For sentence fragments.

- Look for end-punctuation (e.g., periods or semi-colons) that mark complete sentences.
- Put brackets [ ] around all the word groups punctuated as sentences.
- Analyze the “sentences:”
- Does each *sound* like a complete sentence?
- Does each contain a main verb and subject?
- If there are subordinate clauses, are they attached to main clauses?

The steps can be used for proofreading students’ own writing or for deliberate practice, with students playing the role of “editor” or “peer expert” on a sample that contains comma-splices or fragments. Rather than start with rules or explanations, the sequences build on what students already know (even if partially). Students are given a framework to channel their thinking and the instructor can intervene as required. The act of annotating directs students’ attention onto their sentences and how they are constructed. In checking their sentences, they are then asked to tap into their innate sense of a sentence (“Does each *sound* like a complete sentence?”). For many students, these moves should probably suffice for capturing most of the errors. However, as back-up, students are asked to apply a limited *working* knowledge of grammar—“subject,” “verb,” and perhaps “subordinate clause”—for testing trickier sentences, implying certain base-level understandings. These simple (but not simplistic) problem-solving tools work to avoid, as much as possible, the grammar rabbit-holes by tapping in to students’ latent grammar knowledge and by anchoring discussions in actual writing.

## Lesson Planning Tool #3: Creating Contexts— Proactively

At the start of this article, I cited one instructor struggling to balance systematic with contextualized instruction and another grappling with “relevancy,” and since these are common grammar-related issues, at the workshop we interrogate our conceptualization of context so that it is not just a reactive phenomenon but one that can be planned and prepared for. While it is vital to monitor and respond to students’ writing for what they are doing (and, in terms of next steps, on the verge of doing), we also take a proactive stance to context by situating grammar within a broader social and rhetorical framework, as part of students’ communicative arsenal. We thus view grammar through a socio-rhetorical lens, cultivating the most meaningful contexts for literacy learning by emphasizing its role as a social tool and in shaping a writer’s meaning. The prompts that follow speak to modifications, often relatively minor, that instructors can make to their existing grammar curricula to make them more meaning-centered, better integrated with reading and writing, and more relevant to students’ social worlds:

- Have I scheduled mini-lessons during the proofreading stage of writing to support direct application to writing?
- Are exercises drawn from “real” writing, including class texts and contemporary culture, to reinforce the reading-writing connection and emphasize relevance?
- Do exercises engage students at their own level by drawing on their writing, making sure to ask permission and to use examples from across the student body to avoid singling out individuals?
- Do exercises approximate the kinds of thinking processes writers use when they write (e.g., sentence imitation and combining)?
- Have I created a positive and non-judgmental ethos for grammar instruction in which mistakes are seen as a natural

- part of learning?
- Does my curriculum validate language variety and rhetorical choice?
  - Do we share, model, and practice proofreading strategies? Have I discussed the logic of error-patterns with students? Do students target their own errors?
  - Do lessons start with the students rather than the “rule,” tapping into what they already know? Do they encourage social contexts such as collective inquiry and peer-editing?
  - Is grammar tied to the power of student voice, demonstrating the positive impact of syntactic variety on the ethos of the writer and the emotions of the reader? Can I show how excessive error can impact an author’s meaning and credibility (e.g., by performing a think-aloud of a doctored passage strewn with run-on sentences)?

The integration of grammar with reading and writing is further deepened as the workshop transitions to year-long design and a systematic response to the “big” organizational questions—what, when, in what order? In the section below I describe the planning coordinates that teachers use to chart their grammar year plans—how they prioritize topics, integrate them with their existing curricula, and tailor them to the needs of their own students.

## **Navigating the Forest: Tools for Long-Term Planning**

Teachers use three main criteria to prepare their year plans: first, they select and organize in outline the topics that matter most to writing; second, they maximize the reading-writing connection by aligning grammar topics rhetorically to genres of writing (and reading) they are teaching; and, third, they deploy diagnostic and formative assessment to calibrate their planning. These criteria for mapping topics across the year are encapsulated in the three guiding questions below.

*Long-Term Planning Tool #1: Which Topics?* In the light of our overriding goal to improve students' sentence power and correctness, the first step in drawing up long-term plans is to compile an inventory of "high-leverage" topics (a term adapted from Grossman et. al.)—those grammar skills likely to have maximum impact on sentence precision and variety. Before teachers consider their own curricula, they need to be cognizant of what's "out there," the grammar palette from which they can draw; with a handle on the potential scope, they can make informed decisions about their own trajectories. To sketch out a collective provisional list, we comb through existing inventories in textbooks and study their overall logic. Ultimately, we primarily draw from three models which privilege the reading-writing connection and constructivist pedagogy, and which I overview below.

Ching's text-based grammar is the most comprehensive model in the way that it catalogs and organizes topics within a meaning-based curriculum; it can be condensed into the following essential shortlist:

- Sentence fundamentals: identifying *verbs* and *subjects* (the basis for everything that follows);
- When sentences go wrong: *fragments* and *run-ons*;
- Verbs: *making subjects and verbs agree*;
- Verbs: *tense and academic writing* (including *passives and modals*);
- Connecting sentences:
  - *Coordination, transitions, and semicolons,*
  - *Subordination,*
  - *Participial modifiers and phrases.*

Ching's bird's eye view of topics helps define our territory, representing a comprehensive, coherent program, focused on the needs of writers. The trajectory essentially proceeds from sentence correctness to sentence power—though teachers can choose their own entry points based on their students' abilities and needs.

Leah Zuidema’s inquiry-based grammar workshop is aimed at high school students and the center of gravity is again on crafting the written sentence. Her workshop uses guided noticing to invite students to detect structures and structural patterns (e.g., repeated use of sentence fragments for effect) in published writing—students’ “mentor texts”—and apply them to their own writing, so that grammar is “embedded in the contexts of both reading and writing” (64). Zuidema’s program traces a similar arc to Ching, foregrounding issues of correctness and, most particularly, sentence power:

Sentence patterns (simple, compound, complex)  
Verbs,  
Fragments,  
Coordination and subordination,  
Cohesion,  
Sentence rhythm,  
Writer’s voice,  
Adverbials,  
Adjectival forms,  
Nominals,  
Stylistic variations,  
Gendered language.

Ching and Zuidema stand out as reference points for considering scope and organization, but an alternative arrangement by Michael Smith and Jeffrey Wilhelm is notable for the way it synchronizes grammar with writing assignments across successive grade-levels; this is a valuable model for departments who plan as teams and wish to share responsibility for grammar. The authors plan vertically by channeling grammar instruction into three kinds of writing tasks which are revisited year on year—personal narrative, fictional narrative, and expository/argument (72-76). For illustration, here is a summary of their suggestions for the personal narrative with the grammar focus for each grade level (73):

- Grade 5: Autobiography of discrete experience(s) (fragments)
- Grade 6: Themed autobiography, such as literacy autobiography (verb tense)
- Grade 7: Memoir (run-ons/comma-splice errors)
- Grade 8: Multimedia profile of self (comparatives)
- Grade 9: Personality profile of classmate (quotations)
- Grade 10: Process descriptions/how-to of an area of expertise (punctuating transitions)
- Grade 11: Personal Essay/Soapbox (punctuating complex sentences)
- Grade 12: College Application Essay (punctuating parentheticals)

Pinning grammar topics to a fixed set of genres, spiraled across grade-levels, represents an efficient way to ensure their implementation while embedding them within student writing. When fictional narratives and expository/arguments are added to the mix, it makes for a wide-ranging but evenly distributed grammar program.

The sheer scale of grammar coverage found in textbooks, however, can be daunting. Understandably, teachers can be put-off by the apparent glut of terms and implied level of expertise. Killgallon's modules on sentence composing, for example, progress through four different kinds of phrase structures (appositive, participial, absolute, prepositional) and two clause structures (adjective and adverb), inviting the questions: where to begin and how to proceed? This is particularly true for instructors with a minimal background in grammar, confronted by a series of apparently discrete concepts and little sense of how they relate. To help such teachers navigate this particular forest, I introduce a simple reference chart (Figure 2) that highlights the interrelatedness of clause and phrase structures by showing what they *do* to a sentence and how they build on each other.

**Example:** The cat is eating fish. She is very content. (= *two simple sentences*)

You can combine sentences by:	Example and label:
<b>“Bridging” sentences (coordination)</b>	
<p><b>a)</b> using <i>joining words</i> such as <b>for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so</b> (“F.A.N.B.O.Y.S.”)</p>	<p><b>a)</b> The cat is eating fish, so she is very content. (<i>compound sentence</i>)</p>
<b>“Submerging” a sentence inside another (subordination)</b>	
<p><b>b)</b> using <i>signal (subordinate) words</i> <b>who, whose, which, that</b></p> <p><b>c)</b> using other <i>signal words/phrases</i> such as <b>because, since, when, after, while, where, although, if, in order that</b></p>	<p><b>b)</b> The cat, who is eating fish, is very content. (<i>adjective clause</i>)</p> <p><b>c)</b> While the cat eats fish, she is very content. (<i>signal word + clause</i>)</p>
<b>Using phrases (“reduced” clauses)</b>	
<p><b>d)</b> using an <i>-ing or -ed</i> verb</p> <p><b>e)</b> using other <i>phrases</i> (e.g., after <i>signal words</i> such as <b>since, while, although, if,</b> or <i>appositives</i>)</p>	<p><b>d)</b> Eating fish, the cat is very content. (<i>verbal or participial phrase</i>)</p> <p><b>e)</b> While eating fish, the cat is very content. (<i>signal word + phrase</i>) The cat, a fish eater, is very content. (<i>noun phrase appositive</i>) The cat, very content, is eating fish. (<i>adjective phrase</i>)</p>
<p><b>Plus:</b></p>	<p>Fish eaten, the cat is very content. (<i>absolute phrase</i>)</p>

Figure 2: Sentence Combinations Made Simple

Self-evidently, this is not a purist take on grammar; the aim is to represent the widest variety of sentence power moves (i.e., combinations) in the most efficient way, with minimal labels—for example, using “signal word + clause” to subsume both adjective and adverb clauses. On one level, the table assists teachers in decoding textbook taxonomies; packing (and unpacking) complex sentences into simple sentences is surely the most transparent way to demystify complexity. On another level, the table places structures within a bigger picture, proceeding from compound to complex sentences and from clauses to phrases (framed as “reduced” clauses), though teachers are not tied to this sequential logic. It reassures teachers such as the one cited earlier who fears she may have “left something important out” and it offers logical ways forward for those uncertain about next steps. By emphasizing shared characteristics over fine distinctions, it also implies something else important. Rather than assume a linear progression in which every new structure merits equal attention, all that may be required to move students from one structure to another is a little nudging; rather than proceed according to coverage, better to watch and wait, adding precision, wrinkles, or new moves once students have developed a degree of fluency—as well as trusting in students’ own developmental growth.

*Long-Term Planning Tool #2: Which Genres?* The most powerful way to integrate grammar with reading and writing is to marry structures to the kinds of writing in which they are most likely to feature—where they are part of the stylistic D.N.A. This level of synchronization is not an exact science, but the following checklist makes it easier for instructors to match structures to genres and promote the most rhetorically- and contextually-specific writing situations for students to experience grammar:

- Creative writing and literary texts manipulate a wide variety of clauses and phrases to invoke pathos; they also deploy varied and often contrasting sentence types and rhythms for effect, and even punctuation, such as dashes and exclamations.

- Narratives, including biography, tend to feature verbal phrases, which are likely in “any genre that has a narrative sense,” (Weaver and Bush 115). Verbal (or participial) phrases allow the author to modify the subject or doer of the sentence in order to suggest action without requiring a separate sentence.
- Argumentation tends to emphasize logical relations “expressed through coordination, subordination, and the use of transitions and parallel structures” (Ching x).
- Concessive clauses and phrases (e.g., those beginning with “although,” “though,” “while,” “whereas”) are qualifying devices that help increase the credibility of arguments. Concessive constructions are ideal for highlighting the grammatical function of clause and phrase structures and the influence that syntactic choice can have on meaning. Take these two sentences: “Motorbikes are fun,” and “Motorbikes are dangerous.” Ask students to join the two sentences using a concessive structure, first to show a “typical” teenager’s point of view (e.g., “Although motorbikes are dangerous, they are fun”), then a parent’s or guardian’s (e.g., “Although motorbikes are fun, they are dangerous”). The alternative placement of the original two sentences, either as a main clause or submerged as a subordinate clause, reveals how rhetorical significance is implicit in syntax, meaning dependent on grammatical choice, and it also illuminates the role of end-positioning on emphasis—the operative sentence comes at the end. Additionally, the subordinate clause can be readily reduced to illustrate phrase structures (e.g., “Although dangerous, motorbikes are fun”) or moved position to split the subject and verb (e.g., “Motorbikes, although dangerous, are fun”), highlighting the role of parenthetical commas.
- Persuasive writing that makes recommendations, such as opinion and soapbox pieces, lends itself to “modals and other qualifying methods” such as “should,” “must,” “might” (Ching xv).

- Genres such as summaries, reviews, and newspaper articles, in which “persons, places, or events need to be briefly characterized” (Weaver and Bush 115), are likely to make use of noun phrase appositives, an economical way of adding information to a sentence.
- Formal reports might make use of the passive voice to deemphasize agency.
- Biographical writing that considers the subject’s past, present, and future can be useful for showcasing shifts in verb tense and for identifying time markers.
- Texts written “primarily in the present tense” are useful for teaching subject-verb agreement (Ching xv), for example, a description of something people do habitually (e.g., “Every time I get up/she gets up/they get up in the morning ...”).

Matching structures rhetorically and stylistically to genres can support transfer of learning in a number of ways. A very direct way of turning “rhetorical knowledge ... into performance” (*Elon Statement*), it emphasizes procedural skills and the conditional knowledge of how to apply these skills in relation to writing situation and rhetorical impact. By helping to raise students’ consciousness of how structures can increase their sentence power, it can support a meta-awareness of language that Wardle calls “one of the most transfer-encouraging behaviors” (77). Metacognition can prepare students to repurpose skills for different settings, especially if students are asked to make connections across genres and consciously reflect on how a structure used in one genre might also be relevant for a different genre, with a new purpose and a new context (Graff 3). In relation to planning, the rhetorical marriage of grammar and genre means that teachers can pre-empt grammar skills students will need for writing tasks, allowing for proactive interventions. Furthermore, it enables instructors to exploit readings to model how authors use grammar, for example, by drawing attention to particular use of coordination or subordination or the ways authors navigate between verb tense (potentially useful for English Language Learners).

*Long-Term Planning Tool #3: What Do Students Know?* All plans are provisional until students are taken into account. Since the end-goal is to improve writing and maximize long-term retention of skills, it is logical to begin the year with some diagnostic writing to assess students' prior knowledge of (applied) grammar and to continue to gather data formatively during instruction in order to fine-tune plans. Without assessing what students already know and are ready to learn, the possibility exists that instruction is either superfluous or fails to build on students' latent knowledge. Student self-assessment is a vital part of this process, as are ongoing reminders of what students already know, what they have learned, and how they might adapt this knowledge for future applications. As stated, according to the *Elon Statement*, having students consciously reflect on their prior knowledge may prime them to tap into this knowledge when they "encounter writing in new settings." In other words, students need to continually reflect, connect, and project. As we have seen, as part of self-assessment and in collaboration with the instructor, students can set personal grammar targets, perhaps taken from a checklist, and informed by reviewing their past work. Near the start of the year, the whole class might generate a list of topics to be addressed, creating a positive ethos around grammar from the outset. In addition, by reflecting on structures and related "thinking they have done" *after* applying them, students can further raise their metacognition, increasing the likelihood of long-term transfer (Billing 496).

The *Power Write*, described by Fisher et al. as an activity for improving fluency in English Language Learners, can be harnessed as a diagnostic tool for all students. A variation on the quick-write, Power Writes provide both deliberate practice and formative assessment in grammar forms and rules. On a given topic, students are instructed to, "Write as much as you can, as well as you can" (Fisher et al. 96) in three timed rounds, lasting the same set time (e.g. one or two minutes). After each round, students total their word count to chart their (presumably) growing fluency and then reread

their piece, first circling any errors, then correcting whichever ones they can. Besides the pedagogical value of self-assessment, students' circling and correcting of potential errors yield rich data for the instructor: forms that students automatically get right (already internalized); errors they perceive during proofreading and correct (process errors); errors they perceive (by circling) but are unable to correct (thus demonstrating partial-knowledge); and errors they miss altogether (knowledge-based errors). A variation might have students target specific forms, either individual targets or topics recently covered in class (e.g., verb tense). Furthermore, since students are writing "live" in class time, they can discuss and share skills such as proofreading strategies and then try to apply them with immediate effect.

### **From Principles to Practice: Four Teacher Plans**

Drawing on the above guidelines, teachers create their grammar year plans, represented by the four outlines that follow. These provide models for various grade-levels and different kinds of schools. As the outlines make evident, teachers are able to use the long-term planning tools to tailor-make plans for their individual curricula, learning goals, and student populations, each guided by a clear sense of logic; they are also able to make informed decisions based on our lesson planning tools—for example, scheduling and scaffolding proofreading for maximum benefit and contextualizing activities by drawing from course readings and student writing (which each teacher states as their intention). Most teachers put information on slides, which I reproduce here with permission. All names are pseudonyms.

Val: 9th Grade, Public School

Val will be teaching 9th grade in a public school for the first time, though she has taught middle school for many years. Unsure of her new curriculum, she concentrates on the first semester, framing grammar as a tool "to make meaning in writing." Rather

than share a finalized outline, she talks us through her ideas as they are still in flux.

In the first unit, students will interview each other, leading to biographical profiles—students’ first major assignment. Students will also read a variety of models to help them structure their own biographies, likely a mix of published writings and past student samples.

Val intends to include diagnostic writing as part of the introductory unit; however, based on her previous students, she already intends to highlight the “sentence fundamentals” of subjects and verbs in order to attend to a number of essential skills. Students will first become familiar with the role of subjects and verbs by identifying them in sentences derived from class readings, then transfer this knowledge to their proofreading. During proofreading, students will underline their main subjects and verbs, and then check their accuracy according to individualized targets: some might need to check subject-verb agreement, others might concentrate on verb tense, and others might focus on a more rhetorical element—choosing more powerful verbs. To further support this emphasis, Val intends to raise the profile of proofreading by using peer collaboration and by building in scaffolded steps as outlined earlier, including modeling and differentiated choices (e.g., students choose to focus on all or part of their paper and try out different self-reading techniques). In regard to verb tense, students’ personal profiles are particularly appropriate, since, as we have seen, biographical writing tends to include components related to past, present, and future, facilitating explicit attention to the negotiation of tenses.

To increase students’ sentence power, Val hopes to anchor grammatical structures to the genres students will be experiencing, as described in our genre checklist. In the opening biographical unit, students will be encouraged to look for interesting sentence structures in their readings (their “mentor texts”), with a focus on “long and short sentences” and on how such variety can impact meaning. Asking, “How are long sentences constructed?” Val will review compound sentences and introduce verbal phrases, as

appropriate for narrative writing. She will use sentence imitation and sentence expansion exercises (as outlined in Killgallon). In an ensuing unit on argumentation, Val will appropriately focus on structures that signify logical relations: topic sentences, transitions, and possibly subordinate clauses, particularly the concessive. Later, she intends to teach fictional narratives when she will prioritize adjectives/adjective phrases and revisit verbal phrases to add color to students' descriptions. Finally, for summary writing, she intends to introduce the noun phrase appositive as a fittingly succinct way to add information.

In her draft plan, Val is already able to select and organize grammar topics according to their rhetorical relevance to the writing tasks students will be undertaking, while, for correctness issues, she scaffolds proofreading, prioritizes fundamental issues around subjects and verbs, and enables student choice and differentiated targets.

Edgar: 9th Grade, Public School

Edgar, also a 9th grade public school instructor, has thus far struggled to effectively integrate grammar into his curriculum, although he believes his students would benefit from some targeted support. He has, in the past, used worksheets that mainly focus on labeling parts of speech, and admits that he witnessed, "no evidence of transfer to writing." Now he intends to speak to the errors he commonly sees in his students' writing and to align, wherever he can, sentence power with the genres students will be writing. He hopes to benefit all his students, including the English Language Learners, particularly around subject-verb agreement and tense.

Attention to sentence correctness issues is distributed across the year's four units: subject-verb agreement and complete sentences in the first; fragments and run-ons in the second; tense in the third; and reflection and review in the last. To support these and other correctness issues, Edgar will teach proofreading and will provide mini-lessons on grammar skills when students are ready to edit

their papers, gradually increasing student responsibility across the year: first, students will practice proofreading skills and learn about error-patterns; next they will use error-sheets to set personal targets; and, last, they will reflect on their progress to increase metacognition and, thus, likelihood of long-term retention of skills.

For sentence power, Edgar synchronizes relevant grammar skills with rhetorically-appropriate writing wherever possible—verbal phrases for narrative writing, concessive clauses for arguments, and modals and voice (active and passive) for formal research reports.

Edgar’s full outline is demonstrated in his slide (see figure 3). As he is already familiar with his teaching curriculum, he is able to achieve a high level of integration; the logic of his long-term strategy is evident in his ability to prioritize and sequence grammar topics in relation to writing tasks. He includes a diagnostic paper as well as ongoing formative assessment so he can adjust his teaching while working within a framework which is clear and consistent in scope and direction.

<b>9th Grade Integrated Grammar Year Plan</b>
<b>Unit 1: Narrative/Descriptive Writing (Sept. - Oct.)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diagnostic paper</li> <li>• Sentence Fundamentals</li> <li>• Subject verb agreement review</li> <li>• Identifying verbs and subjects</li> <li>• Sentence Combining</li> <li>• Coordination; compound sentence creation</li> <li>• Verb phrases for narrative writing</li> <li>• Punctuation</li> <li>• Capitalization</li> <li>• Comma usage (with compound sentence work)</li> <li>• Proofreading Strategies</li> <li>• How to proofread</li> <li>• Error Awareness (individual and class patterns)</li> </ul>
<b>Unit 2: Informative/Explanatory Writing (Nov. - Dec.)</b>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attention to Verbs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Subject verb agreement</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Sentence Combining <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adjective clauses for logical connections</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sentence Problems <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fragments</li> <li>• Run-ons</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Punctuation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quotation marks and integrating evidence</li> <li>• Parentheses</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Proofreading Strategies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proofreading guide</li> <li>• Error Awareness Sheet - Students Target Personal Problem Areas</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p><b>Unit 3: Argumentative Writing (Jan. - March)</b></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attention to Verbs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Verb agreement/tense consistency</li> <li>• Verbs for introducing summaries and quotations</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Sentence Combining <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Signal words for concessive clauses</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Tone and Voice</li> <li>• Proofreading Strategies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Error Awareness Sheet - Students Target Personal Problem Areas</li> <li>• Proofing Checklist Based on Target</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p><b>Unit 4: Research Projects (April - May)</b></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attention to Verbs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tense and academic writing (active vs. passive voice and modals)</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Sentence Combining <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parallelism</li> <li>• Expanded use of clauses</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Proofreading Strategies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Error Awareness Sheet - Review, Updates and Reflections</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Figure 3: Edgar’s 9th Grade Grammar Year Plan

Marie: 12th Grade, Charter School

Marie is an experienced 12th grade teacher in a charter school with motivated students. Like Val and Edgar, she intends to start

with a diagnostic essay in order to refine how she approaches her grammar plans. Based on her previous teaching experience, she knows her student body tends to have a problem with run-on sentences. She now perceives the cause as likely developmental in origin and therefore sees it as an entry point into teaching semicolons and subordination to link sentences that are closely-related in meaning. By being somewhat heavy-handed towards run-on sentences in her previous teaching, she reasons that she may have inadvertently caused some students to over-compensate, leading to sentence-fragments. In the case of both run-ons and fragments, Marie sees opportunities to discuss sentence formation and control and to improve students' sentence variety and complexity using sentence imitation and sentence combining. Her curriculum also places value on subject-verb relationships, sentence boundaries, pronouns, and prepositions—important areas for all her students, including the English Language Learners (see figure 4).

### **GRAMMAR PLAN for Seniors**

September: Review Sentence Fundamentals

- Identify subjects and verbs
- Identify prepositions and prepositional phrases
- Understand subject-verb agreement

October – December: ISSUE #1: Run-Ons (primary) & Fragments (secondary)

- Learn punctuation rules (comma, semicolon, colon, dashes)
- Add conjunctions
- Recognize and punctuate subordinate clauses and phrases correctly
- Use the words of others (quotations and paraphrasing) effectively

January – March: ISSUE #2: Short Choppy Sentences

- Review punctuation rules (comma, semicolon, colon, dashes)

- Recognize and use verbal and adjective phrases
  - Recognize and use appositives
  - Recognize and correct dangling modifiers
  - Edit for subject verb agreement
- April – May: ISSUE #3: Vague/Incorrect Pronoun Usage
- Identify pronouns and antecedents and edit for agreement
  - Use passive voice selectively and effectively
  - Evaluate adverbial clauses for logic
  - Vary sentence beginnings

Figure 4: Marie’s 12th Grade Grammar Year Plan

### **Sam and Amy: 8th Grade, Public Schools**

Sam and Amy collaborate on a middle school outline, a radical departure from their existing naming-of-parts methods. Instead of teaching grammar in isolation from the rest of the curriculum and “all at once,” they take inspiration from Smith and Wilhelm’s technique of funneling grammar instruction into a limited number of defined writing tasks—in Sam and Amy’s case the genres selected are: narrative, literary analysis, and argumentation. Furthermore, when introducing new structures, they privilege those likely to play a rhetorical role in these three tasks: narrative is earmarked as a natural fit for noun phrase appositives in order to add succinct detail and verbal phrases to enhance descriptions, with absolute phrases penciled-in as a potential next step, depending on student progress; literature essays will spotlight logical connections—transitions, subordination, and semi-colons; argumentation will add concessive clauses. Students also compose book reviews; here, attention will again fall on use of noun phrase appositives to incorporate concise details about author and text.

In relation to sentence correctness, in their opening unit, Sam and Amy introduce the building blocks of the grammatical sentence—subjects and verbs—replacing a previous emphasis on parts of speech. They plan to make proofreading strategies

explicit, including use of the “find and fix” methods for correcting fragments and comma-splices; they also intend to address verb tense consistency and the relationship between pronouns and antecedents, important for the English Language Learners in their classes. Comma-usage will be highlighted for its role in speech punctuation during the narrative unit and for parenthesizing the phrase and clause structures as they are introduced.

Working with their students to create personal targets, Sam and Amy will have their students self-review their previous writing portfolios at the start of the year and they will also collect-in diagnostic papers for their own teacher review. Their plans are ambitious; however, the fact that they are grounded in logical decisions makes the implementation of the grammar curriculum—in whole or in part—far more likely to happen.

**8th Grade Grammar Year Plan**

**Narrative: what do students need to write narrative well?**

- Subject/verb—creating complete sentences; identifying and fixing fragments and run-ons
- Sentence variety—simple, compound, complex sentences; appositives and verbal phrases
- Use of commas—not all rules: focusing on punctuating dialogue and parenthesis
- Verb tenses—present and past tenses: noticing a reason for changing from one tense to the another; step-by-step process for identifying and fixing unnecessary shifts
- Time signal words; transitions

**Expository/literary analysis--what areas of grammar need to be added at this point?**

Figure 5: Sam and Amy’s 8th Grade Grammar Year Plan

- Sentence variety: subordination—adverb clauses, adjective clauses, noun clauses; complex sentences using sentence imitation models
- Punctuating quotes/more comma usage—differentiating between dialogue and citing the text
- Using strong, active verbs; avoiding passive voice and verb ‘to be’
- Transitions for this type of writing, plus semicolons, working on logical connections

### **Argument/persuasion—what points of grammar need to be added for this type of writing?**

- Sentence variety: concessive clauses
- Review and build on citing evidence with quotes
- Pronouns and antecedents
- Introduce transition words specific to argument

## **Closing Thoughts**

The teachers’ blueprints illustrate how the planning coordinates can be used to map out grammar topics, integrated with existing syllabi. Teachers are able to prioritize issues central to sentence architecture and meaning over more surface concerns and differentiate between “musts” (e.g., verbal phrases) and “maybes,” (e.g., absolute phrases), depending on student progress. To further pinpoint topics, teachers consider the genres students will be producing (and consuming) and correlate them with structures most appropriate to those styles in order to deepen rhetorical context, illustrate the power of syntactic choice, and support transfer. Students can apply grammar skills in the most meaningful way, with emphasis on the *how* and the *why*. In relation to correctness, the fundamentals of the written sentence, such as verb tense, can be plotted in advance, while emergent patterns can be addressed as they reveal themselves in student writing, supported by diagnostic tools and self-assessment. Mini-lessons can be scheduled with proofreading to maximize buy-in and application, with students actively participating in target-setting and cataloging their progress in relation to error.

Teachers are, of course, not tied to these plans. On the contrary, as with all such plans, they are contingent; however, whatever adjustments teachers make can be done so within a logical framework. For instructors who prefer to tackle grammar concerns as they arise, or who dip into grammar only occasionally, perhaps in conferencing with individual students, the inherent logic of the framework still holds true, situating a given topic within an overall schema and hierarchy, and making it easier to imagine any potential next steps and systematic ways to implement them. Whatever choices an instructor makes, they can be grounded in the curriculum and students' writing—rather than dictated by a text book.

By applying a set of clear and coherent organizational principles, and by knowing how learning contexts can be proactively anticipated and cultivated, we have seen how teachers are able to plan for sentence-level work. Taking a systematic approach, they are able to sift and sort grammar topics, knowing which matter most, connect topics to particular kinds of writing (and, therefore, writing tasks), and design logical lessons geared towards application and long-term transfer. With reference to context-building, we have seen multiple ways to connect grammar meaningfully to reading and writing, but also to student voice, as well as a range of other pedagogical tweaks, including: emphasizing proofreading, validating and exploring language diversity, treating error logically, and using student self-assessment alongside ongoing formative assessment. With these criteria in mind, teachers can make more informed decisions in response to the questions: what, when, and in what order?

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Thanks to Catharine Lucas, former grammar project leader, for this distinction. As I discuss later in the article, the workshop has lively discussions on notions of “correctness” since there is no singular version of English; we do, however, all agree on the importance of students' ability to manage the written sentence through such features as well-focused subject and verb relationships, command over tense, the construction of grammatically complete sentences, and careful consideration of sentence punctuation (such as end-punctuation) that best serve their intended meaning and boost their credibility as writers.

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## APPENDIX

### Examples of Sentence Imitation and

#### Sentence Combining

In the workshop, teachers try out exercises that I have also used with college students. For sentence imitation, I mainly reference Killgallon for examples of sentences taken from published authors,

although exercises can also be found in a booklet by James Gray and Robert Benson, available online. I cherry-pick the best sentences for my purposes—for example, I might want to avoid sentences that are overly-complicated or distract from the target structure. I include twelve or so in total, and these can include relevant variations—for verbal phrases, for example, most would be verbs ending in –ing, but some might show the –ed past form.

The examples below are reproduced from Killgallon’s chapter on verbal phrases (or “participial phrases”). However, I remove Killgallon’s headings and the bold font to encourage inductive learning: I want students to identify any patterns and variations in the structure, such as sentence position, for themselves.

First, I have students underline the verbal phrase in each sentence. This might lead to conferencing, peer sharing, or whole class interventions, though the point here is not to “correct” each answer, but to cultivate inquiry and direct students’ thinking onto verbal phrases—to get them to notice. Students then compose their own sentences underneath the model sentences—they might choose six or so they want to imitate, depending on progress. As far as possible, students imitate the model sentences word for word, absorbing patterns and building their “muscle memory” for the form:

## Verbal Phrases: Sentence Imitation

### Sentence Openers

1. **Whistling**, he let the escalator waft him into the still night air. Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*

[My example: **Panting**, he forced his canoe to propel him over the cold dark water.]

2. **Looking over their own troops**, they saw mixed masses slowly getting into regular form. Stephen Crane, *Red Badge of Courage*

3. **Amazed at the simplicity of it all**, I understood everything as never before. Alphonse Daudet, “The Last Lesson”

### Subject-Verb Splits

4. My father, **cautioning me not to work a horse till he had fed fully**, said I had plenty of time to eat myself. Lincoln Steffens, “A Boy on Horseback”

[My example: **The instructor, reminding me not to lose focus, told me I had lots of skills to learn.**]

5. Eckels, **balanced on the narrow path**, aimed his rifle playfully. Ray Bradbury, “A Sound of Thunder”
6. The sight of Mick’s exploring beam of light, **flashing and flickering through the submarine darkness a few yards away**, reminded him that he was not alone. Arthur C. Clark, *Dolphin Island*

### Sentence Closers

7. The entire crowd in the saloon gathered about me now, **urging me to drink**. Richard Wright, *Black Boy*

[My example: **A large group on the lake shore called out to me, cheering me on.**]

8. She called to him, **excited**. Daphne du Maurier, “The Birds”
9. The magician patted the hand, **holding it quietly with a thumb on its blue veins, waiting for life to revive**. (two participial phrases) T.S. White, *Book of Merlyn* (Killgal-lon 14-15).

I also take sentences directly from published texts. All examples below were taken directly from a book review introduced to me by

a former colleague, Professor Nelson Graff. The article, by Jessica Bruder, appears in *The New York Times* and reviews the children's book *Once Upon a Banana*, by Jennifer Armstrong. The review is brimming with linguistic drama, including rich verb choice ("tumble," "swipes," "topples," "catapults," "crashes," "dashes"), alliteration ("clumsy chaos," "topples townsfolk") and analogy ("like dominoes," "like a life-size Rube Goldberg machine") that we can mine in class. It also contains copious use of adjective clauses and verbal phrases to which I can draw students' attention. Focusing on the latter, I might start by asking students to see how many verbal phrases they can discover for themselves or I might highlight the relevant structure each time it occurs and ask students to identify any patterns in how it is formed, positioned, or used. Verbal phrases are particularly apt for describing the wild action of the featured book, so there is a link between grammar and meaning that can emerge as students experience the deliberate practice below:

## Verbal Phrases: Sentence Imitation and Sentence Combining

### a) Sentence Imitation

Write your own sentences, attempting to match the sentences below word for word (as best as you can) to try and capture their rhythm and effect.

#### Examples:

1. **Plucked** from the compost by decades of slapstick, the peel portends disaster.

[My example: Raised to the mouth with eager relish, the wine promises pleasure.]

2. As one misstep sparks the next, the town starts to feel like a life-sized Rube Goldberg machine, **juddering** toward an unknown goal.

[My example: As the waiters glide around, the restaurant takes on the appearance of a swarming hive, buzzing with energy.]

- Most picture books plod through their front matter, **treating** the cover, endpapers, copyright and title page like flyover country before finally introducing a story.
- Then the wild-eyed monkey dashes across the inside cover and following pages, **making** a break for his banana.
- Many of the messages are contextually funny, **offering** a stark contrast with the mayhem that engulfs them.

### b) Sentence Combining:

Use verbal phrases to combine the pairs of sentences below, making the action in one sentence the background, explanation, or elaboration for the other.

#### Example:

I wanted milk. I went to the store.

**Wanting milk, I went to the store.**

- I planned to earn a good grade. I studied hard.
- We all walked outside. We enjoyed the sun and the cool air.
- The boys in Golding's novel go wild. This suggests how tenuous our hold on civilization can be.
- Huck and Jim floated along, unable to find each other. They were separated by the fog.
- I ran in the park. I saw a fox.

Note: I leave space under each sentence for students to write their sentences.

In this combined sequence, students practice sentence imitating and combining as mutually reinforcing problem-solving activities. Students might self-direct their own learning, choosing imitating or combining as their preferred tool, and self-assess when they are ready to try out the structure in writing. Imitation can be challenging, though some take to it relatively easily, and it should be enjoyable. I remind students that it is like trying on new clothes—some structures might feel uncomfortable for a while. As extra support, prior to the activities, I have students compose a short description on a topic of their choosing to draw on for their deliberate practice so they can focus attention on their syntax. They might return to this description after the exercises and embellish it with a few examples of the target structure.

# EMBODYING ANTIRACIST PEDAGOGY: WHY IS IT SO DIFFICULT?

Mara Holt, David Johnson,  
Erica Leigh, and Garrett Cummins

“White comfort maintains the racial status quo,  
so discomfort is necessary and important.”  
Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility* (141)

Black Lives Action Coalition, or BLAC, was formed at a mid-size midwestern university in spring 2016 after racist graffiti appeared on a prominent concrete block abutment west of the student center. An image of a lynching was among the racist comments, and this led to a protest of about thirty white and black students in the student center under the aegis of Black Lives Matter. A few students who were still at the center at the end of the protest received racist threats from students walking by. In addition, local social media had erupted with ugly racist comments. In response, a few of the protesters organized the Black Lives Action Coalition (BLAC), and requested that the university create a university-wide required course in what they called “Cultural Competencies.” BLAC wanted the predominantly white student population to be educated, and they hoped that a course dedicated to addressing racism could help. Faculty and administrators were sympathetic, but they cautioned that a dedicated course was not realistic in the short term. Instead, representatives of BLAC worked with the Director of Composition (DOC) to establish an antiracist approach to the first-year writing program, where cultural competence was framed as a course outcome goal along with the WPA course outcome goals.

During Fall 2016, Authors 1 and 2 set up a pilot study called “Cultural Competencies in First Year Writing.”<sup>1</sup> We decided that

having data to support the efficacy of a curricular shift would allow us to make a stronger case to university upper administration for the urgency and impact of a university-wide cultural competencies requirement. In partnership with BLAC, we designed an antiracist curriculum with five Graduate Teaching Associates who volunteered to teach experimental pilot classes in Spring 2017.<sup>2</sup> Five additional teaching associates taught control classes without a cultural competencies focus. Among the experimental classes, the research team employed a mixed methods approach and collected the following data: Pre/Post-Test Questionnaires, three sets of semi-structured interviews per class, minor writing tasks including free-writing, and one major writing task—a Rogerian Synthesis essay.

The DOC, graduate instructors, and members of the research team were initially unfamiliar with the term cultural competence, but members of BLAC presented the concept through the principles outlined by Georgetown University's *National Center for Cultural Competence* (NCCC), a component of the Georgetown University *Center for Child and Human Development*. Building on clinical practices for mental health professionals (Cross et. al.), the cultural competence framework involves committing to organizational practices to ensure that healthcare providers deliver culturally and linguistically responsive and sensitive care to diverse populations. According to NCCC, culturally competent organizations

- have a defined set of values and principles, and demonstrate behaviors, attitudes, policies and structures that enable them to work effectively cross-culturally;
- have the capacity to (1) value diversity, (2) conduct self-assessment, (3) manage the dynamics of difference, (4) acquire and institutionalize cultural knowledge and (5) adapt to diversity and the cultural contexts of the communities they serve; and
- incorporate the above in all aspects of policy making, administration, practice, service delivery and systematically

involve consumers, key stakeholders and communities.

These principles easily fit the context of the curriculum for a first-year writing program, especially in their attention to self-assessment and growth, practices that we want students to understand as essential to critical thinking and writing practices across contexts. The addition of linguistic competence that prioritizes access and accommodates different levels of literacy further mirrors values of writing education. We added the following cultural competencies to our standard WPA outcomes:<sup>3</sup>

- Recognize presuppositions and consider how they shape what we perceive as “reality.”
- Recognize that beliefs and arguments are framed by specific cultural contexts.
- Communicate with diverse audiences through recognizing that genres and conventions are specific to communities.
- Think critically about our position in society and how our values and assumptions influence our relationship with power through awareness, empathy, and responsibility.
- Reflect on how privilege impacts ourselves and others, while exploring options that seek to balance the playing field.

While these outcomes were envisioned within the framework of the cultural competence continuum, there is substantial overlap with essential composition goals of helping students develop awareness of the different layers of rhetorical situations, the situated nature of language, experience, and ideology, and the needs of different audiences. These goals also align with the goals of racial literacy education—where racial literacy is a set of skills, whereby students “are able to discuss the implications of race and American racism in constructive ways” (Sealey-Ruiz 386).<sup>4</sup> In other words, to be racially literate is to cultivate and routinely exercise the capacity to analyze how race and racism shapes everyday life through critical self-reflection, research, and conversation. The maneuvers that are

necessary toward being a rhetorical writer and critical thinker are the same needed toward cultivating racial literacy, and so the goals of writing education and diversity education frameworks like racial literacy can be neatly blended in composition classrooms.

The need to develop curricula based on cultural competencies principles is affirmed by Genevieve Garcia de Mueller and Iris Ruiz' 2017 article "Race, Silence, and Writing Program Administration." They interviewed WPAs to determine the attention to race in writing programs across the U.S. and found it lacking. They note that "When it comes to the consideration of race and writing program administration, . . . scholars of color often work in isolation recognizing that programs lack effective strategies to systematically implement race-based pedagogy. . ." (19). Many white participants in their study who felt that the needs of students of color should be addressed more adequately wanted to be more educated about the issues and felt that the responsibility for addressing those needs should lie with faculty of color (32).

In line with the reluctance to engage in issues of race documented by Garcia de Mueller and Ruiz, it became clear in our study that nearly everyone who taught this course felt uneasy about their roles. In sharing our reflections, we discovered that Author 2 felt discomfort as a person of color teaching antiracist readings because of an assumption that his white students would see him as biased and a fear that they might secretly hold racist sentiment. Author 3 felt discomfort as a white woman because of her white male students' reactions to her gender. And author 4 felt discomfort as a white man because of an assumption that he lacked expertise.

What we realized is that teachers' perceptions of their own embodied identities can get in the way of teaching antiracism. Those of us who are revising curricula to respond to the public outcry about racism in this country should be prepared to confront the issue of discomfort directly and help teachers work through it so that it doesn't undermine teachers' abilities to persevere in the face of racial stress, or what antiracist educator and activist Robin DiAngelo calls "racial disequilibrium" (*White Fragility* 103). This is

the paralysis most of us feel when we're asked to talk about race in a mixed race situation. White people are so unaccustomed to racial stress that we find it difficult to tolerate. When our racial equilibrium is disrupted, we run from that feeling because it threatens our identities as good people. We can, however, develop a thicker skin, and as teachers we must, as the racial demographics shift and our responsibility to prepare our students for the future increases. We argue that teachers should not let their emotional discomfort or perceived lack of expertise stop them from teaching about racial awareness in a writing classroom.

## The Curriculum

The course was designed to address the English Department's First-Year Composition goals of entering conversations and communities of writers, analyzing and using genres, reflecting on writing technologies, practicing processes and reflection, and exploring identity. Additionally, the WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition was factored into the development of the course throughout each unit to meet the larger goals of the course of the general education curriculum at a mid-size midwestern university.

The primary textbook was Rosenwasser and Stevens' *Writing Analytically*. The WPA staff had chosen this book because of its focus on analysis, rather than argument. Students learned to suspend their own judgment about issues while carefully reading texts. Supplementary readings for the course included work from authors across different configurations of identity and lived experiences, such as Geneva Smitherman, Victor Villanueva, Alicia Garza, and Gloria Anzaldúa. Two of the pilot sections also used Ta Nehesi Coates' *Between the World and Me*. Students watched documentaries such as Ava DuVernay's *13th* (about mass incarceration framed within the 13th amendment) and Tim Wise's *White Like Me* (exploring the many layers of white privilege). The readings and other texts were selected to challenge students' worldviews and expose them to perspectives that they might not otherwise encounter. We wanted students to

engage with and reflect on human differences, while learning to negotiate these differences in relation to their own identities and beliefs both on the page and in regular classroom discussion.

Unit 1 focused on visual rhetorical analysis, asking students to carefully examine the details and patterns of a visual image to determine what argument the visual image is making and how. The second unit asked students to undergo the same analytical process with a short print text.<sup>5</sup> Unit 3 offered students an exploration of the research process and the use of evidence. In the fourth unit students employed Rogerian argumentation to present and then synthesize three stakeholder perspectives of an issue and then mediate among the perspectives. Specifically, students addressed three different perspectives on an issue, for instance, Black Lives Matter, Blue Lives Matter, All Lives Matter—respectively—so that arguments supporting each stance are understood. Then the strengths and weaknesses of the stances are presented in a synthesis, followed by a conclusion that attempts to resolve differences among the stances, or alternatively, demonstrate them to be incommensurable.

The five TAs and three research assistants (including members of BLAC) met weekly to converse about the classes and to plan data collection.<sup>6</sup> The graduate instructors recognized the importance of conversation in these classes, especially with the goal of enhancing students' abilities to negotiate emotional conversations with each other about race and difference. Jennifer Seibel Trainor, whose ethnographic work considers the rhetorical layers of race, argues that among the reasons the norms of race are so persuasive for white students is that they operate metaphorically, bridging unrelated domains of political belief and emotion (141). In other words, students achieve a stable sense of self, deeply rooted in emotion around political ideologies framing their world views. And unpacking this intersection through conversation is an essential maneuver for students to challenge what they've internalized as (T)ruth.

The instructors understood that simply getting students to read and write about subjects of identity would not be enough to meet

the cultural competencies goals, and that open dialogue would be essential toward supporting students' rhetorical awareness across communication contexts. They drew from well-known practices in the field of rhetoric and composition toward effective cross-cultural communication, including an invitational rhetoric that prioritizes openness and rhetorical relationships built on understanding over persuasion (Foss and Griffin 5), rhetorical listening practices (Ratcliffe 17), Peter Elbow's "Believing Game" applied toward people's lived experiences, intercultural rhetorical approaches grounded in inquiry (Flower 40), and diversity training dialogues modeled in Lee Mun Wah's documentary *The Color of Fear*.

To promote conversations about race in their classrooms, the teachers in the project had to reckon with their own anxieties, to interrogate their own fears and insecurities. In the next section three teachers of the pilot curriculum grapple with a sense of threat to their identities that the pilot course provoked.

## Teacher Narratives

As Asao Inoue says in his "Foreword" to the collection *Performing Antiracist Pedagogy in Rhetoric, Writing, and Communication*, "white teachers must tread differently than teachers of color" (xiii). He continues:

One might think of it as cooking in someone else's kitchen. You don't know where all the spices are. You don't know what they're saving for next week's dinner. You don't know what set of plates or silverware to use. You don't know that their oven runs a little hot. You don't really know what to bring and cook in their kitchen. (xiii-xiv)

Inoue is asking white teachers who enter the arena of antiracist teaching to bring humility to the task. As a method for bringing humility into our antiracist work for this article, we adopt the framework proposed by Rasha Diab, Thomas Ferrel, Beth Godbee, and Neil Simpkins in their essay "Making Commitments to Racial

Justice Actionable.” They argue that narratives about one’s own experience are valuable if they involve a “willingness to be disturbed” that leads to personal work on the self in conjunction with interactive work with others with a commitment to institutional change (20). The narratives below reflect both a commitment among the teachers to accept their discomfort and learn from it and the courage to continue the work.

## **Author 2: Being the Elephant in the Room: Talking About Race with a Teacher of Color**

The campus climate that provoked the need for a cultural competencies initiative also created an atmosphere of fear for people who look like me, one that included but went beyond a fear for our physical safety. I am a second generation, dark-skinned Indian American man, and my classrooms are largely white. This demographic reality provoked in me a sense of anxiety, stemming from my subject position and body in the classroom space.

As Tim Wise notes in his 2007 talk on the pathology of privilege at Mt. Holyoke, people of color do not embody “the aesthetic that is needed on too many campuses and too many communities around the country, in order to come in and give [talks on race]” (00:01:25-00:01:33). That is, people of color who talk to white people about their own experiences and knowledge of racism may not be believed. My anxieties about teaching the course are an illustration of this reality for teachers of color speaking about race in the classroom. I wondered how I was perceived by white students, especially since I was teaching about race and difference. I worried that my students might be hostile to me and to the course content, and not just in their writing. I worried that I wouldn’t be taken seriously, that I’d be dismissed as the brown man with a chip on his shoulder, making a big fuss out of “non-issues.” I wondered what I’d have to do to be taken seriously, how I’d have to perform.

My double-consciousness also stemmed from years of contending with the perpetual foreigner stereotype from white people, even well-meaning ones—the “Where are you from?” and “Your English

is so good!” sort. I had received student evaluations that said I used too many big words in lectures, that I was trying too hard to prove I was smart. These are comments that one of my brown-skinned mentors from South Asia had similarly received. I was still trying to prove I belonged in the academy despite having earned a seat at the table.

My anxieties were compounded by how most of my students received the course material—with silence. A handful of students engaged on a regular basis, but I didn’t have the rich conversations I had had teaching an advanced composition class centered on racial literacy. That had been an exceptional class, with students who were willing to explore institutional and systemic racism and their own subjectivities and lived experiences. They engaged each other in robust critical discussions, managing and responding to readings from Victor Villanueva, Eula Biss, Claudia Rankine, and Ta-Nehisi Coates. They wrote substantial, inquiry-driven research papers on subjects of personal interest they encountered during the term. And some of them experienced moments of transformation brought on by the critical reading and writing required in the class.

I went into the pilot course expecting a similar experience, and quite confident in my ability to help a class navigate challenging, controversial, and thought-provoking content on identity and writing. My students’ assignments suggested that they were challenging their own assumptions and that the course readings were resonating with them, but any meaningful participation in class required my teasing out responses and negotiating lengthy periods of silence.

My mind went to some unsettling places. I wondered if my students’ writing was honest. Were they closet racists who weren’t comfortable saying aloud what was in their hearts? Would it be easier for them to talk if I were white? These concerns only intensified when I observed Author 4’s class watching Tim Wise’s documentary, *White Like Me*. His students seemed interested and invested in the conversation. They shared their personal thoughts about their own raced bodies. I was envious. It seemed to confirm

my suspicion that my body wasn't credible, that my expertise and my truths were undermined by my race.

That was until Author 1 let me know that in a student interview that was part of the study, one of my white students claimed that I wouldn't have had as much authority on the subject of race if I weren't a teacher of color. I was surprised. I hadn't entertained the possibility that my body might give me a stronger ethos in a class exploring subjects of race and difference. Hearing my student's perspective didn't subvert my belief that my body might be a barrier in the classroom, but it did make the possibility of exceptions more palpable.

Silence is hardly the worst thing a writing instructor, especially one of color, will encounter in the classroom. And thinking back on the experiences I have had with several students over the years sharing racially insensitive and openly hostile perspectives in their assignments, I now recognize that the silence in the classroom likely stemmed from a desire for social safety. Amy Winans, whose work focuses on racial literacy education in rural institutions, explains this phenomenon: "Most white students perceive being racist as socially unacceptable in the middle-class environment of the campus, particularly within the classroom" ("Local" 257). The silence may have been a response to the "threat of being perceived as racist" (257)—a powerful external motivator that is often tied to students' sense of goodness and innocence. In other class contexts, where students' racial animus is displayed on the page, much of their hostility has been directed toward loaded contemporary social issues, including police brutality and the Black Lives Matter movement. In these instances, I realize that my body may not be a conscious barrier for students, especially because I'm a non-black instructor of color.

I must acknowledge my own privilege in the classroom as a male and as a "model minority." Performing an assertive masculinity has worked to my advantage in getting students to take me seriously. The model minority myth may also be operating in strengthening my ethos with white students. And I have a sense of what my female

colleagues and other colleagues of color have to contend with in their roles as antiracist teachers. While I may be able to wield my privilege for good, however, I recognize that doing so carries the risk of reinforcing attitudes supporting male dominance, or reinforcing a racial outlook steeped in anti-black racism. And so, I constantly work to perform a different masculinity in the classroom, to acknowledge my advantages but also share my story with my students – making it clear that race affects me in ways that it doesn't affect *most* of them. As a person of color, I can't take myself out of the conversation, especially in classes about race and difference. I cannot hope to have credibility and authenticity to my students, to myself, and antiracist education otherwise.

Reframing student silence based on a deeper understanding of white students' emotions has helped me better articulate why antiracist pedagogies are needed in writing instruction. The first-year writing classroom can be an ideal space to engage the subject of race, “in part because a key dimension of students' analytical writing skills entails their recognizing the situated nature of their experiences and the interpretive lenses through which they engage with the world, our readings, and their writing” (Winans, “Cultivating” 476). We can cultivate these analytical writing skills in classes with racial literacy outcomes because racial literacy development itself is so dependent on active, intentional critical evaluation of a variety of structures and experience.

Furthermore, given the wide range of ways our students engage with our worrisome and even maddening social, political, and cultural moment, the risks of not making antiracism central to our teaching are too great to downplay. As Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz suggests, “A pedagogy of racial literacy in FYC [...] can not only build students' reading and writing skills but can also provide them with a framework to make sense of the social injustices they will experience or witness as Americans” (388).

The exposure to different world views about language and identity is not something we can afford to leave out of the classroom space. The discomfort of silence in the classroom can be a valuable

tool for writing teachers looking to make antiracism an organizing principle of their writing pedagogy. And learning to negotiate our students' silence can help us develop the resilience needed to handle racial stress of our own. Diab, Ferrel, Godbee, and Simpkins suggest that we need to confront our discomfort and allow ourselves to be disturbed as part of the long-term commitment and sustained effort required for racial justice agendas (20). Robin DiAngelo also foregrounds the need for regular self-reflection and the importance of intentional, ongoing personal work toward active antiracism. According to DiAngelo, part of this effort for people of color involves their "working to identify internalized racial oppression" (*What Does It Mean* 331). Sealey-Ruiz mirrors this argument in suggesting that the goals of racial literacy are not only for white people to "adopt an antiracist stance" but also for people of color to "resist a victim stance" (386). And so, I believe that meditating on my vulnerability helped set the stage for me to have my own transformative moment—to move away from the assumption that my body of color was the problem.

Every class I have taught since the pilot curriculum has reaffirmed my sense of ability and commitment to antiracist pedagogies in writing instruction, and I continue to include cultural competencies outcomes in all of my classes regardless of focus—from rhetorics of health and medicine, to eco rhetorics, to developmental writing. We can do justice to this work despite our hangups, if only we think of the discomfort as an opportunity for growth.

### **Author 3: Students' Gendered Expectations and Active Resistance**

The majority of students in my section of the pilot course expressed willingness to be open minded, at least until they were confronted with their own white fragility and privilege. When critical self-reflection became challenging for students, I observed a negative shift towards me, which I interpreted as a distraction. My own white fragility led me to internalize the negativity, which created a barrier between us. Further into the semester, however, I

learned to be okay with student perceptions of me, because I could see the benefits of their collaborative work with other students, and the value of having a space to discuss tough topics with people their age. My commitment to teaching about racial awareness emerged out of the challenges I faced with my own insecurity as a white woman teaching the pilot course.

I had chosen to focus on gender in the first unit of the course, and I had felt palpably the white male students' expectations of me to be a nurturing mother figure. I invited Author 4 to visit my class for a discussion of gendered expectations of teachers. Students revealed that they expected male teachers to be stricter than females, and they were accustomed to female teachers being more lenient and personally available. Their subsequent behavior in class did not improve. Several young white men, whom I came to think of as the "back-row boys," clustered together in the back of the class and stone-faced me for entire class periods. Their anger impacted other students and increased the silence in the room.

The silence led me to change tactics, privileging small group work over whole class discussions. I put the back-row boys in a group together, and though they still resisted me, they did engage in the material with each other. I started practicing the "think, pair, share" model: I gave students time to reflect independently in writing before discussing what they wrote with partners or small groups. They engaged, but when it came time for the large group share, the conversations fell flat. Seeing the difference between students' engagement with their peers and their engagement with me revealed that students in fact did want to talk about race, racism, and culture – just not directly with their teacher.

I learned that well designed group tasks leading to conversations about the course materials were perhaps more beneficial to students than any lecture or contributions I could make, because students *were* being challenged – but they were working through their discomfort on their terms. Structuring small group activities for students to analyze texts' perspectives afforded them the opportunity to discuss issues in the texts without having to claim personal positions. The

continual group engagement increased students' comfort levels with their classmates. By the middle of the semester, they were arguably more comfortable facing judgment from their peers and having a dialogue about it than fearing judgment from me. I now realize that their fear of judgment may have been part of their resistance to me.

The realization that I was projecting students' fear of judgment onto my gender was a teaching moment for me in understanding that my gender may have been less of a problem than their perceived lack of compassion from me. And what I did not realize at the time was that they were getting compassion from their classmates, even when engaging in dialogue across difference. One student of color emailed me after the course to thank me for exposing the class to the topics at hand. She commented that other teachers seem unwilling to discuss racially charged material, and that she was grateful our class did. Her email affirmed the importance for instructors to address race in our classrooms so our students of color do not end up bearing the brunt of educating white students.

My revelation about the need to express compassion motivates me to continue to be critically reflective of my positionality and my pedagogy. I am just beginning to see how acknowledging my gender and not my race derailed my ethos as a teacher of cultural competencies. As the pilot course continued, I consciously tried to let go of my expectations for particular ways I wanted students to change in line with progressive goals, and let them draw their own conclusions. Robin DiAngelo says that in conversing about racial injustice with another white person that “[u]ltimately, I let go of changing the other person. If someone gains insight from what I share, that is wonderful. But the objective that guides me is my own need to break with white solidarity, even when it’s uncomfortable, which it almost always is” (*White Fragility* 151). In letting go of my insecurity surrounding not feeling respected as a woman, I learned that students who harbor racist sentiment will at least entertain the material I present to the class—regardless of my gender—*because* I am white. The pilot course enabled me to see racial privilege as an access point for white people to embody anti-racist pedagogy, and

the need to engage Diab, Ferrel, Godbee, and Simpkins' concept of being willing to be disturbed.

#### **Author 4: My White Body Fails Me**

When I told my friend Author 2 that as a white man, I hadn't felt qualified to teach this class, he looked surprised and responded, "I feel that as a white man you are obligated to talk about race in the FYC classroom!" Granted that straight, white, married males carry authority and status. When I started teaching for the pilot study, I began from a place of authority. I had never faced the challenges to my authority that my professor wife has faced. I had never felt that my authority could be challenged until I taught First-Year Writing focused on racial literacy. Although I nominally acknowledged my own privilege, I had fooled myself into thinking that my years of teaching experience granted me authority. When talking about race, or other facets of identity such as gender, sexuality, or disability, however, I didn't feel that I had any authority. I felt unauthorized to talk about race for two reasons. First, most of the students of color dropped my class within the first week. Second, my students seemed more conversant than I was in talking about race, gender, and sexuality.

Before I taught this class, I always had some "welcome back to school" schtick prepared for the first day. In this class, I instead explained how students would read academic articles about race as well as some on gender, sexuality, and national/religious identities. I also stressed how I wouldn't tolerate racist, sexist, and homophobic language in the classroom or in written assignments. I said as much on the syllabus. In my mind, I saw these provisos as inviting students of color into the conversation.

But I was wrong. By the second week of class, all but one of the students of color had dropped the class. I struggled to understand why. Weren't my provisos enough? Didn't I set the tone for a serious and culturally respectful class? Sure, dropping is a natural part of college in my experience. This time, however, the whole semester I felt the tension between my antiracist, leftist identity and the fact that the students of color left my course so soon. I figured I had been

a racist after all.

But I held onto one hope: maybe facilitating discussions on race with the students who stayed in my course would allow me to feel like a professional again. When I showed the Tim Wise documentary, *White Like Me*, my students wrote about and shared the implications behind unfair lending and housing practices after World War II. I found the students' insights into how whiteness granted privilege so riveting that I wrote them on the board. I said very little and simply transcribed their ideas. Transcribing without judgment illustrates how I was applying Ratcliffe's concept of rhetorical listening (17). Practicing rhetorical listening allowed one of my students to assert Wise's possible hypocrisy, while another student said he was just using his privilege for allyship. I hadn't taught them that. I became their scribe.

While teaching this class I felt unauthorized and invalidated and felt some empathy with my women colleagues. Why would I ever want to teach this class again? I wanted to run back to my white privilege and male privilege where my white body affords me solace, authority, and certainty. But that's the problem with whiteness, isn't it? I can retreat to it. I can wrap myself in it any time I like. I have the ultimate buffer between my privileged experiences and the raw experiences of women students and students of color. Yeah, I'm the one who needs the cultural competencies. In my necessary discomfort and uncertainty, I concluded the following:

- If white, straight males do it correctly, they should feel incredibly uncomfortable when teaching a cultural competencies writing class.
- Teaching this class gave me some insight into how white male privilege derives from a history of subjugating and oppressing nonwhite, nonmale bodies.
- Race, racial identity, and the raced body are as material in talking about composing academic discourse as are the paragraph, topics of invention, paper drafting and revising, and the thesis statement.

When I was teaching the pilot class, I saw a very narrow context of application for the curriculum. Now, however, I see how this curriculum can work in other writing classes. Doing cultural competencies work helped me see that privilege, race, and class issues connect to science and science-denial within the nuances in political Climate Change discussions. And as I created a Feminism and STEM writing class, I brought my three aforementioned insights into the course design. I will be vulnerable again. If I'm lucky, I will once again listen and record what my students share, write, and discuss. I am ready to be their scribe again.

## Student Responses

All three teachers entered their classrooms most concerned about authority. They eventually discovered that the students were capable of developing their own authority through their writing and their work with each other. In a class focused on writing and talking about race, teacher authority was less relevant to students than it was to the teachers. Author 2's students were writing more than they talked. Author 3's students were more capable of talking to each other in groups than they were of responding directly to the teacher. And Author 4's students proved they didn't need the teacher's lecture to engage the issues that the materials offered. Author 4 became a scribe—writing on the board the conclusions the groups reached so that everyone in the class could benefit. It makes sense that collaborative learning is a successful pedagogical model in classes where students are gaining racial literacy. Working towards conversational ease in discussing racial topics requires practice, with students working it out with peers, not authority figures.

The teachers' concern with authority was linked to white fragility (in themselves or their students). To survive the racial stress that accompanies talking about race, they needed to feel that their students respected them. Among students, however, there was no sign that white fragility was a factor. They didn't appear defensive

about the subject matter, but rather engaged enthusiastically with each other during the classes and during the group interviews.

In interviews that Author 1 conducted with first-year undergraduates who took the classes, she discovered that many students found the pilot class valuable because they had been given a chance to work through issues about race with each other. These issues were coming up in their extra-curricular lives. The class materials were giving them a chance to practice this sort of discussion, rather than avoid it, and some found it cathartic. Even white students who acknowledged their conservative politics said that the curriculum was important for students in their first year. They told Author 1 that gaining a racial literacies background was helping them to understand the context of both national and local discussions about race. Most described their teachers as good facilitators. They did not feel that their teachers' opinions were being foisted upon them. Students of color whom Author 1 interviewed demonstrated an unmistakable excitement about class discussions in which they and students like them served as cultural experts on racial matters.

Some first-year white students, however, complained that we were not teaching writing. A representative example came from an interview with a white male student whose temporary pseudonym was "Sting": *"I have many interests and I feel like we spent a lot of time on [one] segment when [...] I'd like to explore ... other interests . . . in a writing class."* Some of their peers of color disagreed. The difference seemed to lie in familiarity with the issues in the readings. Many students of color embraced the readings as relevant to their lives for a change. The following conversation interrogates white students' responses like Sting's. The group is composed of a light-skinned, multiracial woman (Janis), an African immigrant (Armadillo), and a gender fluid white student (Axle).

Janis: *"I talked to a girl the other day during class, and she said that it frustrated her that it was so much about just all these big topics. She said she wanted to learn more about the writing part of it, not the material that we were learning. Like she didn't want to learn about the material, she just*

wanted to write and that's it. But I think they kind of go together, you know, you learn about it because you're writing about it."

Armadillo: "We actually talked about that yesterday because I heard someone mention [ . . . ] that we were only learning about black lives matter [rather] than normal [readings], because basically the class has been the racial issues that are going on in the U.S. right now, and they were sort of like complaining about that."

Armadillo's response to that student's complaint is to list the writing assignments and then compare the topic to other topics he has encountered in writing classes. He continues:

Armadillo: "I mean you've learned how to visually analyze, you've learned textual analysis, and we're learning synthesis so this is like about a different issue. It would be the same thing like if you were reading something Shakespeare wrote or something like that. I don't see the issue over [the class] being [focused on] this subject matter because it kind of pertains to you. So I don't see any argument to that, but people [still do]."

Below, Janis and Axle explain the importance of the perspectives essay in challenging students to present the arguments of perspectives other than their own.

Janis: "Yes, like for a couple of our assignments we had to look at all the sides. For example, like our last assignment, I was writing about the Muslim [ban] and stuff and the people on the banned [list] from the six countries that Trump acted on. So it was hard for me to like not take sides when I was writing about it. Like I had to try to leave my biases out of it ... by doing it [writing the essay]. It doesn't mean I agree with what [a particular perspective is] saying, it helps me better to understand why they think those things."

Axle: "I mean, it just broadens your understanding of it. Really ... I like the fact that when we had like our last paper, that we had to specifically write about three different perspectives. Like we couldn't just [pick one], and we had to completely avoid talking from our own perspective. We had to really just understand every perspective and that was ... that's like really meaningful because then you can like, if you're caught up in an argument outside of class then... like with somebody else who has a completely different perspective [than] you, you can actually understand because you actually researched it."

Students' focus on the activities in the class—the rhetorical

knowledge gleaned from writing the papers and the practical knowledge gained by researching three perspectives on the same issue—is congruent with the teachers’ discovering that their own knowledge and authority was much less important than the activities that students accomplished together.

## Conclusion

We adopted the cultural competencies curriculum for the incoming TAs for the following fall semester. The focus on cultural competencies in the first-year writing curriculum has continued into its seventh year with two new Directors of Composition, first Rachael Ryerson and then Paul Shovlin. Racial literacy became more popular in the wave of protests against the torture and death of George Floyd. Continuity is important in antiracist pedagogy. Perfect antiracist pedagogy, however, doesn’t exist. Pimentel, Pimentel, and Dean conclude that “antiracist pedagogies are never simple or complete. Rather, writing instructors must be intentionally reflective on their pedagogical practices and constantly adjust their practices to address newly realized forms of whiteness and/or racism” (120).

The need to remain aware of the messages one’s body brings into the classroom and to undergo continual adjustment given the identities of students is important in any classroom, but it is amplified when a course objective is helping students become comfortable talking about race. Much of the unease that teachers of the pilot classes felt had its roots in white fragility. Author 2 was most concerned about what he perceived as the white fragility of his own students when confronted with an instructor of color speaking about race. Author 3 saw gender as an effective evasive tactic, anticipating that conversations on race would prove too fraught for her students. Author 4 saw his own body, and therefore his own white fragility, as a barrier to his ability to teach the class effectively.

All participants have adjusted their practices. All have done the work of reflection which is necessary to an antiracist pedagogy. Author 2 was anxious because of the way he looks—his dark skin tone and

“foreign” look might make him seem like an unreliable narrator for the class material. The fact of his students’ relative silence during class discussions seemed to affirm his fears. But there was also counter-evidence. The quality and depth of the students’ writing assignments told a different story, along with information from an interview with some of his students. Author 2’s research into Amy Winan’s work helped him understand other possible reasons for his students’ silence. And he allowed his awareness of male privilege and the need for people of color to interrogate their internalized racism to complicate his teacher stance. All of this required constant adjustment, as Author 2 continued to use antiracist pedagogy beyond the pilot class into two different teaching positions with different student demographics. After earning his Ph.D., he accepted a Postdoctoral Fellowship in a private university where his colleagues sought his advice on antiracist pedagogy and his students were no longer predominantly white. Now he is a tenure-track Director of Composition at a regional public university with a diverse student population.

Author 3’s discomfort also came out of students’ silence, which she felt as disrespect coming from a group of male students when she was trying to disrupt gender expectations.<sup>7</sup> She made a major adjustment in her pedagogy, moving from teacher-led discussions to peer interaction in pairs or small groups. Gradually Author 3 was able to rethink her assumptions about teacher authority, coming to the conclusion that students were gaining authority collectively by engaging in this tough work with each other. As students gained their own authority, Author 3 was able to loosen her grip on the outcome of that work. After the pilot course, Author 3 adapted the cultural competencies goals to fit a food-themed first-year writing course in which she examined issues surrounding race, identity, culture, immigration, and oppression through food and food related practices. Her consistency in taking an anti-racist approach to teaching first-year writing continued into her Postdoctoral Fellowship at a major state university and now in her job at a private university where she has developed a course that examines rhetorical communication across differences that she will be teaching both in the university and

in a prison.

Author 4 was uncomfortable because he felt his expertise was diminished by the antiracist course materials. Author 4's distress came out of a history of taking for granted his authority as a white male. He felt rejected by the students of color who dropped his class, and one-upped by his students' group reports that revealed insights beyond his own. Author 4 was given the opportunity to realize that his previous teaching had been predicated on the banking model that Paulo Freire had worked against in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Accepting his vulnerability changed his perspective on teaching science writing. He was able to inhabit the perspectives of other minoritized teachers. Author 4 went on to develop an advanced composition course in Women and Science Writing to make more visible the contributions of women to the field of science while analyzing their underrepresentation. He is now teaching at a large midwestern university.

Author 4's discomfort with teaching material he couldn't relate to was echoed in Sting's comment about wishing to write about topics more relevant to him as a white male. But the majority of the students Author 1 interviewed were excited to have a classroom in which they could read and write about perspectives they hadn't been asked to consider before in a class. And instead of having just a unit on difference, students of color were treated to an entire term for which their life experiences had prepared them.

As then Director of Composition, Author 1's anxiety had been based on her predictions that white fragility would complicate the success of TAs who would be required to teach the cultural competencies curriculum if the pilot section led to its formal adoption. As a white professor and supervisor, she was subverting white solidarity, one of the causes of white fragility, according to DiAngelo. A veteran TA who taught the teacher training class one day reported that "TA's unanimously voiced the sentiment that issues of cultural competency are extremely important to address, but they're feeling like they don't quite have the training/apparatus they need (but...does anyone?)." Author 1 was reminded of DiAngelo:

“Whites have not had to build the cognitive or affective skills or develop the stamina that would allow for constructive engagement across racial divides” (DiAngelo, *White Fragility* 55). Author 1 was also reminded of Garcia de Mueller and Ruiz, whose survey results revealed that though all WPAs believed that race should play an important role in the first-year writing curriculum, white WPAs thought that the responsibility for implementing it should not be on them, because they didn’t feel qualified. As a result of white WPAs taking a pass, the issue of race gets little attention in first-year curricula. And this tendency toward avoidance, although understandable, is unsustainable if we want writing programs that value the voices and experiences of all our students.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> IRB # 16-X-411

<sup>2</sup> The study hoped to (1) gain an understanding of how to effectively facilitate discussions about race and difference in First-Year Writing classrooms, (2) influence students’ abilities to negotiate emotional conversations about race and difference with each other productively, and (3) engage students in critical reflection on their own assumptions and attitudes regarding race, difference, and identity.

<sup>3</sup> The OU Composition Program holds that writing and reading are significantly interdependent and always emerge in reciprocal social interactions. These social interactions—and the conventions that enable and constrain them—vary among different communities of writers or disciplines and are always mediated by genres. We also hold that writing both influences and is influenced by identity, and that writing communities and their genres enable and constrain some identities while disallowing others, which requires writers to make choices to conform to or resist those identities. Finally, we affirm that writing occurs in many different modes (print, visual, audio, digital, etc.) and emerges through ongoing processes of invention, production, collaboration, and revision. These outcomes support the habits of mind described in the “Framework for Success in Post-Secondary Writing,” a document co-written by the National Council of Teachers of English, The Council of Writing Program Administrators, and the National Writing Project. The habits of mind are curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, persistence, responsibility, flexibility, and metacognition.

<sup>4</sup> While racial literacy and cultural competencies are nuanced frameworks, they share enough overlap that we use both terms interchangeably from this point forward.

<sup>5</sup>Carl Rogers was a 20th century American psychologist who influenced writing teachers such as Peter Elbow to incorporate careful listening to other's perspectives in small group work. He is known for the technique that therapists use when they paraphrase a client's utterances before moving on.

<sup>6</sup>Following the pilot study, TA's were trained to teach the Cultural Competencies goals through a summer orientation class as well as during a pedagogy class during their first semester.

<sup>7</sup>Author 1's article on the cultural competencies curriculum was published in Daniel Richards's edited collection *On Teacher Neutrality* in 2020.

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# “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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**Martinez, Aja Y. *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory*. Champaign, IL: Studies in Writing and Rhetoric series, CCCC/NCTE, 2020. 190 pages. ISBN: 978-0814108789. \$35.00 (paperback).**

Reviewed by Gabrielle Isabel Kelenyi

Critical race theory (CRT) has become a hot-button issue as of late. *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory* by Aja Y. Martinez is an award-winning contribution to the conversation surrounding CRT. Martinez's monograph offers a clear and helpful historical overview and explanation of CRT in her argument for counterstory as method and methodology appropriate for Writing Studies teaching and research. This review of her monograph aims to elucidate the work's value to K-16 writing activist-teacher-researchers. With its contributions to teaching as well as critical conversations and commitments in Education and Writing Studies, the book actualizes professional statements already reviewed in *JTW*; it can help teachers of writing actualize those statements in their pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, and conversations with families and colleagues.

## Overview

Martinez defines counterstory as methodology and method. As a methodology with interdisciplinary roots, counterstory is a "theoretically grounded research approach [...] that functions through methods that empower the minoritized through the formation of stories that disrupt erasures embedded in standardized majoritarian methodologies" (Martinez 3). As a method, counterstory "[gathers] and [shapes] data into counterstory contexts and characters," which means contexts and characters informed by CRT (Martinez 3). And this is what differentiates counterstory from story: it is informed by the tenets of CRT, which Martinez reviews in detail in the introduction of her monograph. Then, in chapters two through five, Martinez delves into four counterstory methods/ genres,

discusses exemplars of these modes, *and* provides examples of each. Counterstory methods—narrated dialogue explored in Chapter 2, fantasy/ allegory explored in Chapter 3, autobiographic reflection explored in Chapter 4, and dialogic epistolary explored in Chapter 5—are qualitative and person-based; they share narratives that “[center] experiential knowledge so as to better elucidate lived reality from (intersectional) rather than about (essentialist) people of color” (Martinez 14). These narratives are informed by the tenets of CRT and contribute to enhanced understandings of how laws, policies, and procedures operate materially with the goal to expose and eliminate (racial) oppression (Martinez 16). Thus, Martinez’s monograph helps readers understand CRT, and counterstory specifically, as a rejection of “‘neutral’ research or ‘objective’ research” and the recognition of the “experiential knowledge of people of color [as] legitimate and critical to understanding racism that is often well disguised in the rhetoric of normalized structural values and practices” (Martinez 3). For writing activist-teacher-researchers at all levels, Martinez’s explanations, analyses of exemplars, and original examples provide important methods for conducting anti-oppression research and ideas for elevating and composing personal social justice narratives with our students.

## Counterstory and the Teaching of Writing

For teachers of writing at all levels, CRT and counterstory offer a pedagogy for “social transformation” (Martinez 113). Martinez dedicates chapter five to delineating the pedagogical implications of counterstory, showcasing how CRT can serve as a heuristic to help teachers and students alike recognize the prevalence of racism in American society and education in particular (112-113). Chapter 5 of *Counterstory* uses a counterstory as epistolary between Martinez’s composite character Alejandra and her mentor to demonstrate how educators can incorporate more ways of knowing into their curricula that center the knowledge held and created by historically and currently marginalized folks. As a writing instructor, I appreciate how Martinez’s entire monograph but especially her

“pedagogy chapter” (114) and appendices productively challenge and even dismantle common uninterrogated assumptions about writing curricula and college writing, making them crucial reading material for K-16 writing educators; she argues that “Whether presented as primary texts within class [appendices A and B] or applied as a framework by teachers to transform curriculum [appendices C and D], counterstories teach us that ‘construction of another world—a socially and racially just world—is possible’” (Martinez 114, citing Yosso 14-15). And isn’t that the message we want to share with students? In this concluding chapter, Martinez calls on us as educators “to embrace our identities as students,” capable and open to learning in service of reframing, revising, and transforming writing education with critical race theory and counterstory (118).

To help us in that work, Dr. Martinez has many freely available YouTube videos and articles that can be used to supplement the important lessons her monograph forwards and that enact her commitment to accessibility in CRT. I am pleased to highlight two of those resources here, which I hope you, your students, and your colleagues will find useful:

- The first is Dr. Martinez’s presentation for Montclair University’s College of Education and Human Services from May 2021, *Counterstory in Education: Critical Race Theory’s Pedagogy for Social Transformation*. Here, Dr. Martinez explains the tenets of CRT and how the theoretical framework can be used as a heuristic for educators. She explains how her own pedagogy centers CRT through close readings and analyses of CRT counterstory exemplars and even makes the case for all the chapters of her monograph as pedagogy chapters (rather than just the explicitly named pedagogy chapter, Chapter 5). Martinez asks viewers/listeners to consider how CRT and counterstory as a frame can change the way we build courses, especially courses in core curricula where majoritarian narratives have the potential to take root and/or be unquestioningly reinforced.

- The second is Dr. Martinez’s 2018 article from *Peitho Journal*, “The Responsibility of Privilege: A Critical Race Counterstory Conversation.” This piece examines centralized privilege in academic spaces with the goal to help readers think about how stakeholders can make space rather than take space in academic institutions. Martinez encourages readers to not shy away from discomfort as they use their privilege to act as accomplices to folks who are marginalized. The essay, complete with a review of CRT and counterstory, a counterstory example by Dr. Martinez, accompanying images, and real-world social justice examples of access and privilege, provides a clear and cogent argument for how CRT and counterstory can be used to critically reflect and take action in matters of intersectional social justice. In my estimation, it is appropriate reading and discussion material for educator professional development and the classroom.

## Counterstory and Engaging in Critical Conversations

Embracing our identities as students is important for engaging in critical conversations about the interventions CRT and counterstory offer with administrators, colleagues, students, and families. Recent discussions in the media, academia, and even legislation have made CRT sound like a bad word, especially in K-16 contexts. Misunderstandings and exaggerations of what critical race theory is have led to a proliferation of anti-CRT legislation at the local, state, and federal levels (Ray and Gibbons; Sawchuk; Alexander). Given the controversy surrounding CRT in society, let alone education, it can feel daunting to broach the topic with others, especially in the context of institution- and classroom-level pedagogical decisions. Martinez also provides insights for such conversations and interventions in *Counterstory*. These critical conversations with our supervisors, colleagues, and the students and communities we serve can begin with the encouragement to

remain open to learning and open to enacting social transformation through education. Furthermore, not only does Martinez break down the tenets of CRT into eight lucid tenets in her monograph, but she also advances a ninth tenet as her own contribution to the lineage and understanding of CRT and counterstory: accessibility. She argues that counterstories should always envision a multitude of audiences “beyond the ivory tower” (Martinez 18). With accessible examples of what a critical race theory lens reveals in counterstories (like those included in *Counterstory*), it can be easier to explain and advocate for “the contribution of other(ed) perspectives” that speak back to “dominant ideology and its influences on the institution, the society, and the very humanity of people of color, a humanity too often denied” (Martinez 26). As such, *Counterstory* can also help writing teachers discuss and advocate for important interventions in our writing curricula that affirm our students’ humanity.

## Counterstory and Actualizing Critical Commitments

What are these important curricular interventions? Well, let’s take a look at Renea C. Frey’s review of “This Ain’t Another Statement! This is a DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice!” and “CWPA Statement on Racial Injustice” in the previous issue of *Journal of Teaching Writing* to start. Frey’s helpful review cites the rising racial unrest of Summer 2020 that clarified the “deeply racist foundations of American cultural, political, and economic structures” as an impetus for professional organizations to clearly articulate their “stances and reactions to racist practices” (1). The two statements by NCTE/ CCCC and CWPA explain how writing educators’ pedagogical choices can either fuel or dismantle racism in the form of white language supremacy; in their demands and recommendations, these statements acknowledge and push against the racism embedded in writing program, classroom, and assessment policies and procedures (Frey 4). Thus, critical race theory can inform how we, as teachers of writing, “talk about language and writing, how we discuss texts, how we grade assignments, and even

how we interact with students, parents, and colleagues” (Frey 2) in ways that decenter whiteness and instead center how racism operates in our daily lives. Given the disensus around CRT but its importance for developing equitable educational policies at the classroom level and beyond, it’s important that writing educators develop a deeper understanding of critical race theory and its applications to Writing Studies research, teaching, and critical conversations. *Counterstory* can help writing teachers develop that deeper understanding; in my estimation, it is *for* teachers of writing who are interested in more ways to “work to dismantle the ideology of white supremacy that is entwined in our institutions within the very discourse practices we teach” (Frey 8).

## Conclusion

I was initially drawn to Martinez’s work because I saw a bit of myself in her—a Latina in Composition and Rhetoric—and I wanted to work with narrative, which Martinez does in important anti-oppressive ways. In my opinion, Dr. Aja Martinez accomplishes her “task to write [her] way into the academy through a tracing of a revisionist history of rhetoric and writing studies with critical race theory and counterstory as [her] guiding forces” (4) with *Counterstory*. I read myself and my family members in her stories. And that’s important because representation matters (Martinez 27). Somehow, some way, I felt more confident that I could do graduate school and get a job in academia afterwards because she had. Thank you for that, Dr. Martinez.

However, I highlight her work here in *JTW* not only for other Latinas in education and writing studies, but for all writing educators because CRT and counterstory are important interventions to speak back to unquestioned norms that mask bias and racism in Writing Studies and writing education. Martinez’s monograph provides important and clear explanations of CRT and counterstory, helpful analyses of examples, and detailed pedagogical applications for the theory, methodology, and method. For teachers who want to identify and mitigate their own biases as well as those inherent in

our classroom and institutional policies, procedures, and curricula, *Counterstory* is essential reading; counterstory, as method, “[tells] stories of those people whose experiences are not often told” and, as methodology informed by CRT, “expose[s], analyze[s], and challenge[s] majoritarian stories of racialized privilege and can help to strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival, resistance, and justice” (26). This book can help teachers of writing understand, explain, and enact the important demands and recommendations in “This Ain’t Another Statement! This is a DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice!” and “CWPA Statement on Racial Injustice” in meaningful ways. To paraphrase Martinez (27), the book can help teachers, students, researchers, and practitioners of writing develop a (race) consciousness that can enhance our pedagogies, writing programs, and institutions.

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**Baron, Naomi S. *How We Read Now: Strategic Choices for Print, Screen & Audio*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. 284 pages. ISBN: 9780190084097. \$29.95.**

Reviewed by Alice S. Horning

It's surprising to me that a very important and useful book for college for all writing teachers, Naomi Baron's *How We Read Now*, has so far received little attention in our field since its publication in 2021. Reading is an essential complement to writing instruction at every level so everyone who teaches writing can benefit from Baron's practical insights. The book addresses a number of key issues for classroom teachers by providing a detailed review of research on the current state of reading along with discussion of useful strategies for teaching and learning. The book's Foreword, written by Maryanne Wolf, another leading reading researcher and director of the UCLA Center for Dyslexia, Diverse Learners, and Social Justice makes the case for more attention to critical reading in education generally (p. xi). The book is broken into four parts, each of which is devoted to an aspect of the contemporary reading landscape, including traditional print, the array of digital options, audio and video. This approach is noteworthy since it recognizes the increasing integration of listening and speaking with reading and writing. The first part addresses traditional reading of alphabetic texts on paper, noting that research shows that not all the conventional strategies recommended to students work effectively; the ones that do help are those that require active engagement with the text. So, highlighting and underlining are not especially useful but quizzes (in the text itself or mindfully self-imposed) and summaries that probe main ideas and details can be useful if done carefully. These print-based approaches can also be useful when dealing with an array of different types of texts in media other than traditional print, as discussed in the rest of the book.

Baron is especially good at synthesizing current research on reading in different media and her skill is on full display in the

second part, where she presents the research on digital reading. Here, most but not all studies show that reading digital materials is generally not as effective as reading traditional print. Baron relies for support on the work of the Stanford History Education researchers. This group of scholar-teachers has done a series of studies of middle school, high school and college students' critical literacy skills in working with online source materials of all kinds. Their findings show that "digital native" status notwithstanding, a majority of students lack the skills to understand and evaluate much of what they read online (Wineburg and McGrew; Wineburg et al.) That research makes clear why everyone should be paying much more attention to students' reading; writing teachers are not the only ones for whom this claim is true, but we are the ones most likely to see students early in their academic careers in required writing courses.

We are also the faculty most likely to connect to library colleagues who have much to offer to build students' information literacy. The Stanford studies, done by faculty in History Education, explore the online reading abilities of a nationally representative sample of middle school, high school and college students. In untimed tasks on the open internet, 50 to 80% of students were unable to complete critical reading and evaluation of an assortment of materials like videos, tweets and more conventional texts (Stanford History Education Group). Similar research again with national samples of students done by Project Information Literacy librarians produces similar results (Head, Whibey et al.: Head, Fister et al.).

Results of standardized testing of students, despite the known flaws and biases of such testing, also make clear that they do not perform as well on digital texts and tests as they do on paper (pp. 114-115). Baron's book reveals the importance of understanding the nature of contemporary reading and why all writing teachers should be helping students read more effectively and efficiently. Print-based skills like drawing on prior knowledge and summarizing will be useful as both teachers and students work to develop skill in search, synthesis, and appraisal of varied resources online. Maintaining the

reading of literature of all kinds as well as informational reading is going to remain important along with the ability to sustain attention for full-length texts like books. Baron concludes her review of research on reading multiple texts this way: “Online reading potentially encourages less complex and reflective thinking than reading in print, for both single and multiple document reading” (p. 121). Still, she predicts a future in which much reading will include both print and digital reading, the same “biliteracy” approach supported by UCLA literacy scholar Maryanne Wolf based on her own research (Wolf). Baron’s final point in this section is that this view is really important to “digital reading for civic good” (p. 150), because it encourages fact-checking and other antidotes to so-called “fake news” so that readers will be “better equipped ...to vote knowledgeably and to participate in civic discourse” (p. 151).

In the third part, Baron examines audio books and other audio “reading,” possibly my favorite part since I am a huge audio book fan. Audio books have a number of advantages insofar as they slow down reading and ensure that every word comes to readers/listeners, not true of print reading. Taken together with video, these alternative media do present some key challenges in that they are much more transient than printed text. For this reason, watchers/listeners must pay full attention, resisting the temptation to multitask (p. 195). Taking handwritten notes is also key with audio and video texts, which for now lack the technology to allow notetaking within the body of the material, though such notes are now possible for alphabetic texts with programs like PowerNotes and Hypothesis. A few online video/audio annotation tools are already available with more surely to come (cf. Vialogues, a free program (p. 196)). So, there are strategies and technology available for listening and watching, even though many studies show that reading is not as effective in these forms. We know from Daniel Keller’s research that students (and the rest of us) are coping with the pile up of materials online (Keller calls this accumulation, following the work of Deborah Brandt) and the speed at which material appears (Keller’s acceleration). It is really essential that faculty pay more

attention to reading. The use of mindful choices of reading strategy as recommended by University of Connecticut reading and writing scholar Ellen Carillo offers a “Monday morning” approach for all classrooms (Carillo). Her textbook offers *A Writer’s Guide to Mindful Reading* that gives students a range of options for applying a mindful framework to all kinds of reading tasks. She is preparing a research report on the effectiveness of this approach in the writing classroom.

Finally, in the last part, Baron provides her view of what is likely to happen next in the reading environment, with strategies for effective reading and learning as the technology continues to develop. Awareness of purposes for reading and conscious choices of strategy (as suggested by Carillo’s mindful reading) will always be important since they allow for appropriate choices of level of engagement and speed. Reading carefully rather than superficially skimming, avoiding distraction, and making use of different “containers” (i.e., print, digital, audio and video) can all improve reading outcomes. Finally, Baron concedes that not enough is being done to develop students’ critical thinking abilities (pp. 219-223), though reading will always be a part of this set of skills. She encourages readers to advocate strongly for more and better reading instruction across the educational spectrum with her reading “plate” following food writer Michael Pollan’s eating advice: “Read more. Focus when you do. Medium matters” (p. 230).

### **Monday morning advice**

I want to end this review with Monday morning steps every writing teacher can take. The first of these is to make peace with the compelling need to work on reading directly and explicitly in every class. Both qualitative and quantitative research shows that vast numbers of students in classes now really do need help with reading that we can provide; if we are really committed to the level of student success the government thinks we should be achieving, and if we are really committed to making sure all students can do the work we expect, much more attention to reading is needed in every class (both Baron and Wolf make this point; my own argument

appeared in 2022). As part of this effort, you can help students more if you see reading, as I like to say, as a team sport.

- Make friends with colleagues in other disciplines and encourage them to read Baron's book, or even just this review and some of the sources on the Works Cited list at the end.
- And ditto for your librarians: go beyond the basic library instruction students might usually get by inviting a librarian into your classes, encouraging or requiring students to seek research consultations with librarians, and ask for shared approaches to information literacy that librarians will be happy to provide.
- Easy things to do in class: have students bring a book—any conventional print-based book—and read for 10 minutes at the beginning of class every day. \*Encourage students to work on building the ability to sustain attention by timing their own reading experiences, extending the time they spend with a text by 5, 10, 15 minutes without checking their phones, walking away, chatting with friends and so forth.
- Teach lateral reading, tested and proven effective by the Stanford researchers, a technique for evaluating websites by leaving a site to test for authority, accuracy, currency, relevance, appropriateness and bias.
- Do any kind of exercise to provide students with an experience that makes clear the failure of multi-tasking; just putting an end to the myth of multi-tasking can help students to be better writers even if their reading per se doesn't improve.

While there are a good number of other evidence-based things to do on Monday, I will just share one revelation that happened in one of my own classes a few years ago. In a first-year writing course, I had students reading *The Shallows* (Carr), which seemed to

me at the time to be a current and lively discussion of the impact of technology on all of us. Discussion on the first couple of chapters fell absolutely flat in class. It dawned on me to ask the students if they found the reading difficult and they reported significant trouble with the vocabulary. I had them re-read and mark three words on each page that they did not understand. When they returned, I was astonished when I put these words on the board, and a number of students concurred about some of the words. I regret that I did not save the list, but I was really amazed that the students had made it to college without vocabulary I thought they should know. We did some work on getting meaning from context, on proper use of a real dictionary (i.e., not dictionary.com), and on word structure—prefixes, suffixes, roots and the like. So, working on vocabulary is something else you can do, even in mini-lessons, that offers students a concrete tool they can use in their reading and writing in your class and all others.

Finally, I contacted Naomi Baron to ask for specific advice for writing faculty that I could include in my review. Here's what she said:

Students are more aware of differences between reading in print versus digitally than we generally realize. If you take the time to ask them, they often tell you they read more quickly with digital text, multitask more, and concentrate less than when reading print. Even before the pandemic, many students reported being torn between reduced cost for digital textbooks and better concentration with print. The sharp digital tilt during the pandemic has made digital reading more the norm, for better or worse. My advice to students and faculty: Don't assume that we read – and learn – the same way in the two media. When you're reading digitally, slow down, don't multitask, and focus. (Personal communication by email September 15, 2022)

These are important suggestions that can be used when teaching

the mindful approaches advocated by Ellen Carillo. Understanding different strategies that might be used in different reading situations or for different purposes and making conscious choices among them offers one way to incorporate Baron's suggestions in class.

Baron's book offers a very useful overview of the current landscape for reading on paper and on screens of all kinds. She writes in a friendly and accessible style that is easy to read and understand, with plenty of good ideas but no preaching. Reading the book will make you a better writing teacher because it offers you, as I hope is clear from my discussion, a lot of ways to understand and integrate reading into every writing classroom, whether in K-12 or at the postsecondary level. Baron, like Wolf and others she cites, recognizes the essential role reading plays in students' education and will play in their lives as workers and citizens. The book deserves your full attention for this reason and all the others given here.

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Note: a portion of this review appears in my forthcoming book, *Making the Case for Critical Literacy: The Lost History of Reading in Writing Studies*, with permission of the Utah State University Press.

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